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“...continuing to gain its [China’s] buy-in will be crucial in further refining and effectively implementing the Responsibility to Protect.”

China and the Responsibility to Protect From Opposition to Advocacy

Summary

- Despite its initial opposition to the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), China is now considered more than a cautious supporter.
- During the drafting of R2P, China—traditionally protective of sovereignty and reluctant to intervene¹—dispatched harsh critiques of the new concept but gradually increased its engagement in the debate.
- Over time, its efforts were successful in reaffirming support for a state-centric system by narrowing the emerging principle.
- At the 2005 United Nations (UN) World Summit, China endorsed the final R2P document, which included new conditions for intervention (e.g., UN Security Council authorization and demonstration of the state’s failure to protect).
- China’s voting record for applying the principle demonstrates its commitment in practice, but mainly for pillars one and two.
- Regarding pillar three—permitting the use of force—China is reluctant to act unless (1) the principle is invoked strictly within the confines of the 2005 World Summit Outcome language, and (2) applying R2P does not lead to significant reforms of the target state’s political infrastructure.
- Given China’s rising role in shaping the rules of global governance, continuing to gain its buy-in will be crucial in further refining and effectively implementing R2P.

Introduction

The Responsibility to Protect principle reframes sovereignty as a responsibility, as opposed to a right, of states.² This means that each state has a responsibility to protect its populations and prevent mass atrocities and abuse. If the state is incapable of doing so, then the international community has a responsibility to act. The principle reflects a broader trend of global governance, showing a gradual pushback on the boundaries of sovereignty in regards to human security, statebuilding activities, and coercive intervention.³

China has traditionally held a hard conception of sovereignty and shown a reluctance to further the liberal order.⁴ Yet its position on the Responsibility to Protect has continued to evolve. Despite China’s initial outright opposition to the principle, and predictions that it would at best adopt

a cautious approach,⁵ China now firmly advocates building state capacities for the prevention of mass atrocities consistent with R2P pillars one and two. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC), China has endorsed the principle's application in multiple countries: Democratic Republic of the Congo and Burundi (2006); Darfur (2006); Libya, Côte d'Ivoire, South Sudan, and Yemen (2011); Mali (2012); Somalia (2013); and Syria (2014). However, it has also vetoed use of the principle, including in Myanmar, following its refusal of aid after Cyclone Nargis in 2007.

These cases illustrate that while China accepts the prudent use of R2P—even permitting the use of force—it does so under two conditions: (1) the principle is invoked strictly within the confines of the 2005 World Summit Outcome language, and (2) applying R2P does not result in significant reforms of the target state's political infrastructure.

China's Historical Trajectory with the Responsibility to Protect

2000–05: Opposition

During drafting of the R2P document, China took the “hardest line against intervention and in defense of sovereignty,”⁶ purporting that

- challenging sovereignty, unless for the benefits of self-defense, had no role in the UN Charter;
- the responsibility to protect would be abused by states operating in self-interest;
- the tensions between universal individual human rights versus rights of nations were yet to be reconciled; and
- these efforts would only introduce Western views and double standards in global politics.⁷

Thus, with serious concerns about the proposed principle, China joined the coterie of states seeking to constrain it. Their efforts succeeded in reaffirming support for a state-centric system by narrowing the emerging principle. At the 2005 UN World Summit, China acknowledged that “when a massive humanitarian crisis occurs, it is the legitimate concern of the international community to ease and defuse the crisis.” However, it also reiterated that “[e]ach state shoulders the primary responsibility to protect its own population...” and “[any] response to such a crisis should strictly conform to the UN Charter and the opinions of the country, and the regional organization concerned should be respected.”⁸

Reflecting this sentiment, the 2005 approved R2P language is markedly different from its original.⁹ The World Summit Outcome Document lifted the threshold on target states from being “unable and unwilling” to protect their citizens to having to show that these states are “manifestly failing” at protection. It also set the conditions that UNSC authorization be obtained prior to action and that the principle only be applied to confront genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing. Finally, it stipulated that the international community act in a “timely and decisive manner,” within the bounds of the UN Charter and in concert with regional organizations on a case-by-case basis.

2005–08: Toleration

Although requiring some persuasion, China endorsed use of the principle in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Burundi and Darfur, ultimately determining that the UNSC's resolution language aligned with the World Summit Outcome Document wording.¹⁰ Also notable, China did not join other states when they began a rollback on the principle.¹¹ Instead, it emphasized that any revisions to R2P would require endorsement from the UN General Assembly,¹² pushing back against those that tried to “expand, willfully... interpret, or even abuse this concept.”¹³

2009–Present: Adaptation

A 2009 follow-up report on implementing the principle cast it as “an ally of sovereignty, not an adversary...the responsibility to protect seeks to strengthen sovereignty, not weaken it.”¹⁴ The report employed a strict interpretation of the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document but clarified the significance of the three-pillar strategy for advancing the mandated agenda:

1. States bear primary protection responsibilities.
2. The international community should assist states to meet their protection responsibilities.
3. The international community should be prepared to use force via the UNSC, if peaceful means fail.

At this juncture, China began advocating the greater involvement of regional organizations, the use of state-level early warning systems, and a reframing of the international community’s “timely and decisive response.” In so doing, China emphasized state sovereignty as a means to achieve human protection.

China asserted that allowing regional organizations to have a greater say at the UNSC would help ensure that local understanding, regional sensitivities, and resource capacity are taken into account. Traditionally, regional organizations are wary about intervention, reinforcing China’s view that sovereignty is prime in international politics.¹⁵ In 2010, China initiated its first-ever thematic debate on how regional organizations could promote multilateralism and boost international security.¹⁶ The country continues to develop regional architectures, launching the Initiative on China-Africa Cooperative Partnership for Peace and Security in 2012.¹⁷

China also argued that the international community should support states and regions to acquire effective early warning systems.¹⁸ In this view, China recasts the meaning of a “timely and decisive response” by the international community. The country essentially supports a long-term proactive strategy for the lasting protection of vulnerable populations, rather than a short-term reactive response at the outbreak of conflict.

During this period, China invoked R2P pillar one in Côte d’Ivoire, Libya, Mali, Somalia, South Sudan, Syria, and Yemen.¹⁹ However, China abstained from voting on a no-fly zone for Libya, referring to pillar three language.²⁰ The controversial compromise was viewed unfavorably both within and outside China; and many believe it drove China to veto multiple resolutions on the Syrian crisis.²¹ To address the harsh criticism of these vetoes, China tentatively floated a nascent, semi-official concept of Responsible Protection, which reframed the vetoes as fair and responsible. First published in March 2012 by a Chinese think tank official,²² the concept established six criteria for intervention that would restrict when nonconsensual measures could be used, emphasizing a means-end tradeoff (e.g., it is “absolutely forbidden to create greater humanitarian disasters because of protection”). However, Responsible Protection was short-lived and does not appear in Chinese discourse after 2012. Instead, China backs the revival of Brazil’s Responsibility While Protecting initiative and continues to focus on the first two pillars of R2P.²³

Conclusion

China’s voting record on employing pillars one and two and continual engagement in shaping the R2P norm shows that it is more than a cautious supporter.²⁴ However, it continues to signal its skepticism regarding pillar three. Like other emerging powers, China uses normative discourse to increase its international presence,²⁵ and its moderate approach demonstrates a commitment to operating within the current rules-based system, while encouraging a constrained, multilateral

R2P response. Given China's position on the UNSC and rising role in shaping the rules of global governance—while not necessarily pushing for more governance—its continued engagement and buy-in will be crucial in further refining and effectively applying R2P.

Notes

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ABOUT THIS BRIEF

Courtney J. Fung is an assistant professor of International Relations in the Department of Politics and Public Administration at the University of Hong Kong. This brief examines China's evolving position on the Responsibility to Protect and its role in shaping the principle's mandate and application.

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