Intervention in the Emerging Multipolar System: Why the R2P will Miss the Unipolar Moment


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In his infamous discussion of collective action problems, Mancur Olson noted:

…if the members of some group have a common interest or objective, and if they would all be better off if that objective were achieved, it has been thought to follow logically that the individuals in that group would, if they were rational and self-interested, act to achieve that objective.¹

While international relations is full of collective action problems that can be identified and explained, one of the most important over the last sixty years has been the actions of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

Comprised of 15 members, with 5 holding permanent seats and veto power, the UNSC is considered under international law to be the legitimate body in establishing and maintaining international peace and security. This enormous and vital task is guaranteed under Chapters VI, VII and VIII of the United Nations Charter, which clearly outlines the composition, responsibilities and powers of the Security Council in its quest to control the delicate balance between over 190 self-interested, security maximizing states. At the heart of this body, and its enforcement capabilities in ensuring international order, are the Permanent 5 (P5) members of the Council, who also happen to be the major powers of the modern world – the United States, Great Britain, France, Russia and China. It is the decisions, norms and preferences of these 5 powers that ultimately dictate the character of peace and security globally, and who is accountable when things go wrong.

Heeding Olson’s point, it is logical to assume that rational actors, which states are, will work toward common goals if they see it or them as being in their self-interest. Behind the genius of putting the victors of WWII as the P5 members of the UNSC is the judgment that the common goal in the wake of the Second World War would be to provide a sense of interstate stability and order, particularly with the introduction of nuclear arms into the security calculations of states. It follows, therefore, that the collective action which best suits the interests of the P5 and other rotating UNSC members is to design strategies capable of maximizing security in a distrustful and anarchic international system of states.

Recently, however, arguments surrounding the structure, role and powers of the UNSC have come into question. Among the major criticisms leveled at the Council is its supposed inability to mobilize both politically and militarily in the face of humanitarian crisis. Genocides in Rwanda, the Darfur region of Sudan and the former Yugoslavia are only some of the most recent examples of where the UNSC has elected not to intervene under its Chapter VII mandate to protect human populations at risk. Though many proposals aimed at either reforming or transforming the Council have fallen on deaf ears, one concept continues to play a role in encouraging the UNSC to act on behalf of individuals when their personal, or human, security is at risk. This doctrine is known as the Responsibility to Protect, or R2P.

Since its initial articulations in 2001 by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, R2P has sought to establish clear and consistent criteria for when the UNSC has the direct responsibility to act in the name of human security. In essence, R2P attempts to alter or redefine the collective action problem of the UNSC by moving its mandate away from maintaining the balance of power between states to instead protecting humans in crisis.

Many scholars, policy makers and other observers have embarked upon discussions and debates surrounding the ideas of R2P and humanitarian intervention more broadly. A primary component which lies at the centre of human security avocation is the common interpretation that the nature of security has altered with the end of the Cold War. The post-Cold War era signified the emergence of rampant idealism in theoretical and global circles, and led many to argue that intrastate, rather than interstate, conflict would be the wave of the future. In fact, R2P seems to exemplify this sort of idealism in the wake of the Cold War era. What has been overlooked, however, is the structural arrangement of the international system since 1991 and the ongoing systemic change the world is currently witnessing.

The fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 brought an end to the bipolar structure of the international system that had been in place since the end of WWII. The United States entered into an era of hegemonic unipolarity, with no major powers capable of rivaling its hard or soft power. It was this systemic environment, dominated by western (or American) ideals and norms, that allowed for doctrines like R2P to become popularized. Even so, since the failed intervention in Iraq starting in 2003, the era of American hegemony has been coming to an end and the system is on the verge of becoming multipolar in structure, bringing with it the potential for new balancing strategies, alliances and a new set of security variables. It is in this context that the future of interventionist sentiment and calls for UNSC moral agency in the name of R2P must be questioned.

This paper argues that, while humanitarian intervention and R2P are still important normative concepts, the willingness of the P5 members of the UNSC to intervene in the name of humanity are likely to decrease. We will first highlight the enormous reluctance to implement interventionist strategies in both bipolar and unipolar structures and explain why this is the norm, not the exception, of UNSC action. Second, we will examine the effects of systemic structure on the security and self-help calculations of states and why this impacts UNSC members’ willingness to enforce human security. Lastly, the paper will demonstrate that the severe constraints of a multipolar structure and rise of powers like Russia and China are bound to bring the future of doctrines like R2P into serious question.

The Evolution of R2P: plus ça change c'est la même chose?

There are myriad books and articles providing accounts of the evolution of the Responsibility to Protect.2 The key moments in this evolution are not especially contentious; much greater

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controversy, however, surrounds two related issues: first the allegedly deleterious effects R2P has had, and will have, on international peace and stability and in particular sovereignty; second, whether R2P has actually changed anything, i.e. whether it is merely a restatement of existing law. This section seeks to engage primarily with the second of these debates and demonstrates the extent to which R2P reconfirms the primacy of the P5, proscribes unilateral intervention and advances a ‘solution’ predicated on the capacity of moral pressure to change the disposition of the P5 away from narrow self-interest. The fact that R2P is so heavily reliant on P5 authorization necessarily raises questions as to the factors – particularly the extant systemic configuration – which influence the foreign policies pursued by each of the P5. These systemic factors are assessed in this article’s later sections.

The failure to act in response to the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 was described by Paul Kennedy as “the single worst decision the United Nations ever made.” Whether the ‘United Nations’ made a decision not to intervene is a contentious point, however; the capacity of the UN to independently order an intervention and to deploy troops was (and remains) non-existent and thus the action that was required to stop the egregious violence could only have been sanctioned by the P5. A more accurate appraisal of the response to the genocide, therefore, suggests that the P5, rather than the UN, consciously chose not to intervene.

The genocide was the catalyst for two themes which came to dominate the debate on humanitarian intervention during the 1990s; first the term “Never again!” once again gained currency; second, the rights afforded to sovereign states were increasingly challenged. It is curious, however, that the primary ‘lessons’ propounded after the Rwandan genocide appear to have had little to do with the actual cause of the desultory international response. The refrain “Never Again!”, though often solemnly articulated, has often appeared as little more than an empty slogan when contrasted with the glacial pace of reform and the international community’s erratic response to instances of alleged and clear genocide in the modern era. The notion, therefore, that rearticulating a slogan that had wide currency prior to the genocide – to manifestly little effect – does not make a lot of sense. Additionally, the lack of intervention in 1994 actually had nothing to do with sovereignty; Wheeler notes: “…the principle of sovereignty was never raised…no state tried to defend the UN’s stance of non-intervention on the grounds that genocide

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fell within Rwanda’s domestic jurisdiction.”7 The primary cause of the much criticized ‘response’ to the genocide was predominantly the unwillingness of the P5, and indeed all the other major powers, to take action, a point noted by the UN’s own enquiry into the genocide.8 This catastrophe, therefore, exposed in graphic detail both the absolute centrality of the P5 in determining the UN’s response and the primacy of political will – and its narrow scope – in determining how these five states respond to unfolding genocide. Thus, while Rwanda was one of the ‘immediate stimuli’ for the ICISS’s report,9 the key cause of the manifestly lamentable international response was actually ignored.

While Rwanda was a key catalyst for R2P, NATO’s intervention in Kosovo was in many respects the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back. NATO’s intervention was famously described by the Independent International Commission on Kosovo as “illegal but legitimate”10 and it was precisely this disconnect between legality and legitimacy that troubled the then UN Secretary General Kofi Annan who called for new thinking on ways to resolve the questions surrounding international responses to intrastate crises.

Rather than pose the issue in terms of the rights of intervening states, the ICISS placed the onus on states to meet their responsibilities to their own citizens. In the event that a state failed to meet this responsibility the international community had a responsibility to protect citizens within this state. International intervention to stop human rights abuses, the report argued, need not take the form of military intervention which is legitimate only in extreme cases.11 The ICISS offered six ‘Principles for Military Intervention’ – criteria which must be met for an intervention to be legitimate – namely right authority, just cause, right intention, last resort, proportional means and reasonable prospects.12 The criterion ‘right authority’, was the subject of an entire chapter and the ICISS clearly privileged the UN as the entity with the legitimacy to order an intervention; all those seeking to launch an intervention, the ICISS advised, must seek the Security Council’s approval. The ICISS warned that acting without explicit UN approval ran the risk of undermining the UN and international law more generally. In terms of addressing the biggest issue regarding the Security Council’s record on humanitarian intervention – the veto power of the P5 – the ICISS suggested a ‘code of conduct’ whereby,

…a permanent member, in matters where its vital national interests were not claimed to be involved, would not use its veto to obstruct the passage of what would otherwise be a majority resolution.13

If, however, the Security Council did not act when a crisis passed the just cause threshold, the ICISS suggested the matter should be taken to the General Assembly which could employ the

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12 Ibid, 32.
13 Ibid, 51.
powers vested in it through the *Uniting for Peace* resolution.\(^{14}\) Additionally the ICISS suggested that regional organizations could undertake an intervention and seek to have retrospective legitimacy bestowed on their actions by the Security Council.

Of course the most obvious alternative to Security Council authorization, and that which caused the controversy over NATO’s intervention in Kosovo, is unilateral intervention. The ICISS outlined ‘two lessons’ which should guide thinking in respect to this issue. First, they warned that in the face of Security Council inaction “…it is unrealistic to expect that concerned states will rule out other means and forms of action to meet the gravity and urgency of these situations.” Such interventions “…may not be conducted for the right reasons or with the right commitment to the necessary precautionary principles.” Second, if action is taken without the Security Council’s approval and this action proves successful “…then this may have enduring serious consequences for the stature and credibility of the UN itself.”\(^{15}\)

In assessing the ICISS’s report, two significant weaknesses related to the question of authorization are apparent. Though a significant section of the report was devoted the question of right authority the final recommendations – the ‘code of conduct’ – was a highly idealistic ‘solution’. A non-binding agreement in itself is a problematic legal mechanism while the very idea that the P5 states would collectively have no interests in the outcome of a particular intrastate conflict was arguably quite naive. Another hugely significant issue was the fact that the ICISS essentially fudged the issue of unilateral humanitarian intervention. While the report intimates that such action could conceivably be legitimate, it refrains from offering an endorsement or proposing an alternative means by which interventions could be legitimized absent Security Council authorization.

In May 2002, the Security Council discussed the ICISS’s report. The US “was noticeably unenthusiastic about the debate” while additionally “there was widespread opinion in the meeting that if new situations emerged…the five permanent members and broader Council would lack the political will to deliver troops and would limit themselves to condemnatory resolution.”\(^{16}\) The US rejected the idea of being bound to commit troops should the ICISS’s thresholds be breeched while the Chinese opposed any diminution of the of the Security Council’s monopoly on the legitimization of the use of force, a perspective shared by Russia.

At the 2005 World Summit, two paragraphs – 138 and 139 – were included in the final *Outcome Document* explicitly endorsing the notion of a responsibility to protect. The compromises which secured the inclusion of these paragraphs, however, ensured that the primacy of the Security Council was maintained and unchanged; the modest amendments suggested by the ICISS were in essence ignored. The idea of the P5 agreeing not to use their veto powers – the ‘code of conduct’ – was jettisoned early in the negotiations. Additionally, the notion of legitimate intervention without explicit Security Council approval was ‘sidestepped’\(^{17}\) or perhaps more accurately, \(^{14}\) Ibid, 53  
\(^{15}\) Ibid, 55.  
consciously ignored. The consensus reached on R2P and included in the Outcome Document was, therefore, arguably achieved only by conceding key aspects of R2P. Therefore, the Outcome Document constituted for some, “a step-backward…R2P lite.”

In the aftermath of the 2005 World Summit it was agreed that the General Assembly would formally discuss how to implement paragraphs 138 and 139 of the Outcome Document. This debate began on the 21st July 2010 and afterwards a number of very positive appraisals lauded the event as a significant achievement. It is doubtful, however, whether the declarations made really amounted to anything more than a non-binding promise to do better and a restatement of existing law. There was widespread agreement that R2P was not a new legal principle, as indeed the Secretary-General had emphasized in his pre-debate report. The impetus for this argument appears to have been the perceived need to counter the suggestion that R2P could be rejected on the grounds either that it has no legal basis, or that it is in conflict with existing international law. The fact that R2P does not constitute a new legal principle may well negate the argument that it is somehow contrary to existing international law, but this also means that it necessarily constitutes a reassertion of the discredited status quo. A conspicuous omission during the debate was a discussion of the process by which the international community can, and more importantly will, become involved in a particular situation without the host state’s consent. Additionally, and perhaps most significantly, there was no answer to the seminal question, “In the event that an intra-state crisis reaches a particular nadir and the host state is evidently unable or unwilling to address the situation, what guarantees are there that the international community – and chiefly the Security Council – will respond?”

If we accept that the non-intervention in Rwanda and the contentious unilateral intervention in Kosovo were the major catalysts for the emergence of R2P – a proposition few could seriously contest – then by identifying the seminal sources of concern and opprobrium in both cases we can judge whether R2P has addressed the problem it was established to solve. The issue common to both undoubtedly stems from the power of the P5; in Rwanda the P5 had no interest in intervening resulting in inertia and outrage. In Kosovo, three members of the P5 decided to intervene unilaterally, raising questions as to the very efficacy of international law and the dangers posed by extra-legal interventionism. R2P has not, it must be stressed, in any way altered either the structure of the international legal system, its laws, or the decision-making process. R2P is totally dependent upon the political will of the P5; there is no compulsion to act or punishment for inaction and thus R2P is, in Frank Berman’s succinct description, a ‘discretionary entitlement’ which can be operationalized only if the P5 are inclined to do so.

19 Weiss (2007), 177.
The Security Council has always had this right as per Chapter VII of the Charter; the problem was, and still is, the erratic utilization of this right. While the P5’s use of its Chapter VII powers increased dramatically after the end of the Cold War, it was obviously a function of political calculations and the national interests of the P5. The intervention in Haiti in 1994, for example, appeared on one level to herald a new intolerance of military coups against democratically elected governments. In fact, the US had a significant interest in stemming the flow of refugees from Haiti, while China acquiesced with the operation because the US promised it support for a World Bank loan if it did so. The lack of national interest among the P5 in Rwanda, by contrast, resulted in no action being taken despite the obviously enormous need.

As R2P has not changed either the locus of authority or the decision making process this means, in effect, that its added value is ostensibly its capacity to somehow act as a moral lever; a means by which the P5 can be pressurized to take action by the power of persuasion. The centrality of political will has been acknowledged by many who have spoken in support of R2P. There are two problems with this approach: first, it is not at all clear that even democratic states are receptive to the blandishments of concerned individuals or groups. The invasion of Iraq and the non-intervention in Darfur both appear to confirm that democratic states are quite willing to ignore international and domestic public opinion. Of course, this propensity to ignore pressure is naturally more problematic with respects to Russia and especially China. Thus, the “moral pressure will force the P5 to act” argument lacks historical precedent and is, in essence, highly dubious. Second, the argument that R2P is a process whereby the international system is gradually civilized assumes the normative trajectory which accelerated after the end of the Cold War is somehow irresistible. The hubristic teleology which informed the “end of history” still impacts on the faith in R2P with its inherent belief in the immutability of the current course towards the proliferation of democracy, human rights and “global justice”. Yet, if we assume that the trajectory of the post-Cold War era has been progressive – characterized as it is by the new prominence afforded to democracy, humanitarianism and international justice – we must remember that this was caused by a systemic change, i.e. the shift from bipolarity to unipolarity. Thus, quite logically, systemic change impacts on the trajectory of normative evolution and this evolution is, therefore, prey to reverses as well as dramatic advances. If, as would appear to be clear, we are in the early stages of another shift in the distribution of power then this must have implications for the efficacy of R2P.

An integral component of R2P implementation and interventionism is the argument regarding the progress and evolution of humanitarian norms since the fall of the Soviet Union. Like the system created at the conclusion of WWII, and throughout the entire history of the states system, great powers are left with the burden, or responsibility according to R2P, of enforcing these altered norms. What must be noted in such idealistic aspirations is that the P5 have yet to make use of R2P and continue to demonstrate an unenthusiastic attitude toward interventionism. In

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25 See Evans (2008), 7; Bellamy (2009), 119.
order to comprehend why, one need examine the underlying motives that affect interstate
decision making, and how the P5 perceive each other, and the system, more broadly.

**Polarity, Great Powers and Collective Action**

In order to comprehend which states are likely to bear the burden of interventionist policies, one
must clearly look to those that are capable. It is no surprise that the five victors of WWII were
given permanent status in the UNSC because of the role given to the Council as a whole. According to Chapter VII the UN Charter, “The Security Council shall determine the existence of any threat to the peace, breach of the peace, or act of aggression and shall make recommendations, or decide what matters shall be taken…to maintain or restore international peace and security.”

It can therefore be assumed that the framers of the UN system envisioned a world where the great powers held primary responsibility for ensuring a stable international system in the wake of major war.

The role of great power politics at the UN cannot be separated from its often misinterpreted goals of promoting human rights, dignity and humanitarian assistance. In fact, one might argue that the UN system epitomizes the realist thesis of international relations because of the centrality and power granted to the Security Council. Indeed, Nigel White describes the veto as “a realist core in an institutionalist framework – a political core in a legal regime.”

The crucial purpose of creating the UN was to prevent another major war among great powers – not to create a humanitarian utopia. As Dan Plesch clearly reminds us: “the primary purpose of the international system is conflict prevention and its wartime architects bequeathed us this system as a realist necessity vital in times of trial, not as a liberal accessory to be discarded when the going gets rough.”

In order to prevent instability in the system, those calling for the creation of the UN saw the need for the great powers to control the balance of power and also to prevent them from making war on one another, hence the purpose of the veto. Even with the realist undertones to the UN system, it was not the role of the Security Council or the UN more broadly that prevented major war in the wake of WWII. Instead, it was the arranging structure of the international system that was more responsible for controlling the behaviour of all states, especially the great and super powers.

Identifying the great powers in a given historical era is how one can best comprehend the normative interests and behaviours of states. Great powers are able to impose their norms and interests on other states who align with them. It is, according to realist theories, the interactions of great powers that dictate the level of stability in the international system at any given time, and when these relations become increasingly tense, the possibility for conflict greatly increases. This stems from the fact that great powers, like all states, are never entirely certain of others’ intentions or actions. According to John Mearsheimer, “Uncertainty about intentions is unavoidable, which means that states can never be sure that other states do not have offensive intentions to go along with their offensive capabilities.” Distrust is a natural consequence of

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27 UN Charter, Chapter VII, Article 39.
the anarchic structure of the international system, as is the propensity for states to maximize their security. Though all states embark upon self-help behaviour in an anarchic system, great powers have greater benefits and risks due to their abilities to extend their spheres of influence, but also tend to attract greater levels of opposition in efforts to prevent the emergence of a hegemon.

What is a great power and why do they matter so much in the daily operation of the international system? States are all security maximizing, rational actors. Mearsheimer explains this bedrock assumption:

[States] are aware of their external environment and they think strategically about how to survive in it. In particular, they consider the preferences of other states and how their own behaviour is likely to affect the behaviour of other states, and how the behaviour of those other states is likely to affect their own strategy for survival.  

For the most part, states have a limited set of hard and soft power capabilities, which prevents them from asserting themselves internationally on any consistent basis. Great powers, on the other hand, must be analyzed differently.

If the majority of states are middle or small powers, those who obtain great power status become far more indispensable in explaining the functions of the international system. Classifying states as lesser or great powers is achieved by assessing their capabilities. Defining a state as a great power is only possible if the combined strength of its capabilities across all sectors provides it with the ability to pursue its interests. Kenneth Waltz argues that states “are not placed in the top rank because they excel in one way or another. Their rank depends on how they score on all of the following items: size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability and competence.” If, after calculating each of these areas, a state is able to use its power and capabilities to extend its sphere of influence, it is granted great power status in the system. Once the number of great powers at a given time is determined, one can then comprehend the polarity of the system and how states are likely to behave.

At the end of the Cold War, the system was ushered into what Charles Krauthammer often referred to as the ‘unipolar moment’. This time was characterized by American hegemony as no clear balancing rival was evident at the systemic level. Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth explain the context of American hegemony: “In the following years the Soviet Union collapsed, Russia’s economic and military decline accelerated, and Japan stagnated, while the United States experienced the longest and one of the most vigorous economic expansions in its history.” Due to the lack of clear adversary in capabilities during the immediate post-Cold War era, the system was said to be unipolar in its structure – where one power supersedes all. Questions regarding polarity are important not just in the context of theoretical analysis, but also in understanding the normative agenda of states, and international institutions, in the post-Cold War world.

There are, according to structural realist theory, three types of polarity which can be identified by counting the number of great powers in a historical epoch – bipolarity, unipolarity, and multipolarity. Comprehending the pole of the system matters to structural realists because it provides insight into just how stable the relations of states, and therefore the entire system, will be. As Waltz notes, “The stability of the system, so long as it remains anarchic, is then closely linked with the fate of its principal members.”

The principal members to which Waltz refers are the great powers. The purpose here is not to explain why states are pushed into becoming great powers, but rather, to examine the effects of polarity on interstate behaviour.

The most stable and preferential systemic arrangement is bipolarity, like that seen throughout the years of the Cold War. Bipolarity is a system dominated by the power and interests of two great, or super, powers. Bipolar systems are thought to be more stable for three reasons:

First, the number of conflict dyads is fewer, leaving fewer possibilities for war. Second, deterrence is easier, because imbalances of power are fewer and more easily averted. Third, the prospects for deterrence are greater because miscalculations of relative power and opponents’ resolve are fewer and less likely.

Multipolar systems differ in character based on the number of great powers in the system. Multipolarity is thought to exist when there are three or more great powers whose capabilities provide them with sufficient ability to pursue their interests. In multipolar systems, conflict is thought to be far more probable, primarily based on the number of competing interests and spheres of influence at one time. A chief reason for the conflictual nature of multipolar arrangements is the probability of miscalculation of threats and relative gains. Waltz contends that such “miscalculation is more likely to permit the unfolding of a series of events that finally threatens a change in the balance and brings powers to war.”

The last, and more unlikely arrangement, is that of unipolarity. Christopher Layne summarizes a unipolar system as “one in which a single power is geopolitically preponderant because its capabilities are formidable enough to preclude the formation of an overwhelming balancing coalition against it.” Based on these descriptions, it is evident that international history since 1900 has seen all three types of systemic arrangement, as well as the rise and fall of various great powers.

The years of the Cold War were marked by the bipolar relationship between the United States and Soviet Union. While it is possible to look to the role of institutions like the United Nations in explaining why major war never broke out between the two superpowers, it is far more accurate to refer to the constraints of the system as the crucial explanatory variable. Mearsheimer supports this claim by contending:

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35 Waltz (1979), 162.
36 For more on why states become, or are prevented from becoming, great powers, see Waltz (1979), Layne (1993) and Mearsheimer (2001).
38 Waltz (1979), 172.
The peacefulness of the postwar era arose for three principal reasons: the bipolarity of the distribution of power on the [European] Continent, the rough equality in military power between those two polar states, and the appearance of nuclear weapons, which vastly expanded the violence of war, making deterrence far more robust.\(^{40}\)

Interestingly enough, the structural arrangement in the wake of WWII is also capable of describing why the two superpowers, along with the other 3 members of the UNSC, were reluctant to embark upon clandestine interventionist missions in the name of humanitarianism.

Due to the underlying belief that states are rational actors, we return to Olson’s ideas regarding collective action. At no time during the years of the Cold War was humanitarian intervention the preeminent issue motivating the P5. As noted previously, the collective action problem facing the P5 was the issue of stability in the wake of major world war, and in the emerging nuclear age. This assumption follows from the logic that groups will behave in a self-interested manner because individuals do. In an anachronic, self-help system, regardless of the polarity, humanitarian intervention is simply not in the rational interests of UN member states. Of course, states can act irrationally and make poorly calculated decisions. If, however, irrational actions are the ordering principal of an organization, it is likely to die. Olson emphasizes this point: “…organizations often perish if they do nothing to further the interests of their members, and this factor must severely limit the number of organizations that fail to serve their members.”\(^{41}\) In 1945, states bound themselves to the UN for the expressed purpose of national security in an increasingly uncertain world.

During the Cold War there was one form of interventionism, of course, namely traditional peacekeeping. Peacekeeping strategies fit very well into the collective action choices facing the P5 throughout the Cold War, as the intention was not humanitarian protection, but rather, the insurance of order and stability. Throughout the Cold War, it became obvious that the P5 would never invoke collective security measures against each other and so a new form of conflict containment strategy, rather than resolution strategy, became necessary. Furthermore, peacekeeping and Cold War interventionism was mostly aimed at lesser powers precisely because there was no appetite for the UNSC to disrupt the balance of power in the name of universal human rights. Regarding peacekeeping, David Cox argues:

> It was not designed to be used at all in uncompromising conflicts between the rival power blocs, but instead for conflicts amongst smaller powers, in non-bloc areas, and in situations where the great powers might find their hardcore interests so little threatened that international intervention might be preferable to unilateral interventions which could lead to unwanted great power confrontations.\(^{42}\)

Many often associate the UN’s role throughout the Cold War as a peacekeeping force and the efforts of the institution to control the potential spread of conflict. It is true that the UN embarked upon interventionist policies during the bipolar years of the Cold War, but such

\(^{40}\) Mearsheimer (1990), 11.

\(^{41}\) Olson (1971), 6.

missions were often failures due to a lack of commitment from member states, as in the case of Cyprus, or such operations led to confrontation between the two superpowers, as in the case of the Congo. In most cases, UNSC-approved interventionism in a bipolar structure were porous efforts to limit violence in erroneous states in the systemic hierarchy, and if the balance between the US and Soviet Union came into play, operations were either never initiated or were ultimate failures.

With the fall of the Soviet Union came a substantial shift in the polarity of the system to Krauthammer’s unipolar moment. It is in the context of American hegemony at the systemic level that attitudes towards R2P and humanitarianism began to evolve in a rhetorical sense, leading some to believe that the role of the UNSC was also on the verge of alteration. What became evident very quickly, however, is that the collective action problems that had plagued the Security Council from its outset were not so easy to overcome, even with doctrine that moved beyond traditional peacekeeping. Regardless of the hegemon’s normative desire to promote democracy, freedom and human rights, the continued concern for stability, balance and self-help continually dictated the calculations of the P5.

The End of Unipolarity and the Future of R2P

Throughout the Cold War, the politics and decision making processes of the P5 were defined by the bipolar structure of the international system. The relationship between the Soviet Union and the US defined just how far the Security Council would go to stabilize the system and live up to its Charter mandate. At the outset of UN operations, the boycott by the Soviet Union and the absence of Communist China actually allowed for a functioning UN system. The return of the USSR to the table and the eventual inclusion of mainland China ultimately thrust the UNSC into security dilemma behaviour.43 Once the Soviet Union collapsed and the international system went from its bipolar arrangement to one of unipolarity, the politics of the UN, and the whole international realm, began to change.

As noted previously, R2P and other such idealistic doctrines were born out of the ever-present concept of “Never again” and also the perception that bipolarity was to blame for Security Council inaction. According to some onlookers, the actions of the UN in the immediate wake of the Cold War represented a concentrated effort to reconstruct the global order. According to Weiss et al., post-Cold War security operations at the UN

…represent the first UN attempts at creating or re-creating civil order and respecting the rule of law where governance and stability had either broken down or been nonexistent. They entail reconstructing the social and economic infrastructure, building democratic political institutions, proving humanitarian assistance, and much more. This task expansion changed the character of humanitarian agencies and led to much soul-searching.44

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44 Ibid, 75.
It is difficult to argue against claims about the evolution of the Security Council and UN operations in the wake of the Cold War, but pointing to idealism as the source of such changed behaviour is short-sighted.

The 1990s were thought by some to mark a shift in not only the way states behaved, but also in the way international relations as a field of study explained interstate politics.\textsuperscript{45} Shifting the level of analysis away from the system in favour of human-centric policies and explanations led to security operations like those seen in Kuwait, Somalia, Haiti and the former Yugoslavia, and culminated with the publishing of R2P in 2001. No such changes, it is argued here, would have been at all possible without the consent of the P5, but most notably the hegemon in the international system. Therefore, the unipolar moment and humanitarian doctrines like R2P owe their existence not to idealism alone, but also to the structure of the system itself.

Ignoring the effects of a unipolar system on R2P’s creation and eventual adoption is difficult to conceive. The relationship between the system and R2P is rooted in the explanatory power of the hegemonic stability theory.\textsuperscript{46}

The preponderance of power experienced by the US after the Cold War certainly falls within the realm of hegemonic stability theory. According to the theory, the international system is likely to be extremely stable if a major power has a large enough monopoly of power. William Wohlforth explains the driving thesis of hegemonic stability theory by claiming:

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The theory stipulates that especially powerful states ("hegemons") foster international orders that are stable until differential growth in power produces a dissatisfied state with the capability to challenge the dominant state for leadership. The clearer and larger the concentration of power in the leading state, the more peaceful the international order associated with it will be… Hence both the overall size and the comprehensiveness of the leader's power advantage are crucial to peacefulness. If the system is unipolar, the great power hierarchy should be much more stable than any hierarchy lodged within a system of more than one pole. Because unipolarity is based on a historically unprecedented concentration of power in the United States, a potentially important source of great power conflict-hegemonic rivalry—will be missing.\textsuperscript{47}
\end{quote}

As the US went through the unipolar moment, so did the UN. Though other P5 states played roles in affecting outcomes, often hindering UNSC decisions by using their veto power, the normative agenda of the UN was profoundly affected by the interests and foreign policies of the US under both Presidents Clinton and Bush.\textsuperscript{48} This comes as little surprise because, as hegemonic theory has always argued, the regimes established by the hegemon are what dictate

\textsuperscript{45} For a comprehensive analysis of changes to international relations study and theory, see Tim Dunne, Milja Kurki and Steve Smith (eds.), \textit{International Relations Theories: Discipline and Diversity} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).


\textsuperscript{48} See David Malone (ed.), \textit{The UN Security Council: From the Cold War to the 21st Century} (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2004).
the political, economic and security agendas of the system as a whole. The important connection here is that, though the US has had a tense and often uneasy relationship with the UN and other P5 members since the end of the Cold War, it had been successful in getting others to bandwagon and promote its political interests worldwide.

Among these interests were the promotion of democracy, human rights and stable regimes in areas of the developing world. Such norms were at the centre of the Clinton administration’s foreign policy initiatives, broadly labeled ‘democracy promotion’. According to former US Secretary of State Madeline Albright,

> The international community, through the UN or other means, had a responsibility to help societies endangered by natural or human-caused catastrophe. It was in America’s best interest to ensure that this responsibility was fulfilled because it would make the world more stable and peaceful, and because it was right.

If deemed to be a responsibility of the hegemon, it logically follows that R2P is a clear consequence of hegemonic interests, even if action is separated from rhetoric. Above all, it was the perception of the US as a benevolent hegemon that encouraged humanitarian-focused principles to emerge, not idealistic norms alone. Layne effectively summarizes this point: “That is, by exercising its preponderance through multilateral institutions and accepting externally imposed restraints on its power, the United States can demonstrate to others that its hegemony is benign, because it is based on mutual consent, and give-and-take.”

The connection between the interests of the hegemon and R2P are even more apparent under the Bush administration. It became immediately evident that the benevolent and liberal era of US hegemony would come to an end once the 2002 National Security Strategy of the United States was released. This document, which promoted what became known as the ‘Bush Doctrine’, called for unilateralism, preemption and regime change if it served the interests of American national security. Such policy proposals acted directly in the face of what made American hegemony acceptable to other states. According to John Ikenberry, the acceptance of the unipolar structure prior to the Bush era was based on the multilateral and benevolent nature of US hegemony: “American hegemony is reluctant, open, and highly institutionalized—or, in a word, liberal. This is what makes it acceptable to other countries that might otherwise be expected to balance against hegemonic power, and it is also what makes it so stable and expansive.” As Bush’s foreign policy objectives became more evident, so too did the decline of America’s preponderance of power.

A hallmark of the Bush Doctrine was a substantial level of ignorance as it pertained to unipolar hegemony, as Bush and his advisors consciously sought to take advantage of their relative power position in the international system, which in turn led to the start of its major decline. In his

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2006 discussion of US primacy, Layne warned: “attempting to sustain U.S. primacy may well hasten its end by stimulating more intensive efforts to balance against the United States, thus causing the United States to become imperially overstretched and involving it in unnecessary wars that will reduce its power.”\(^5^3\) Ironically, Bush’s foreign policy not only ended the preponderance of American power that defined the unipolar moment, but it also destroyed the substance and purpose of R2P.

The Bush administration’s interventionist policies had a number of consequences which profoundly impacted on the trajectory of R2P as well as the US’s own preeminence. Firstly, the administration justified its two major interventions – Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) – to a large extent on humanitarian grounds. While neither intervention was solely justified on humanitarian grounds, significant emphasis was placed on the benefits of overthrowing tyranny, spreading freedom and democracy, and protecting the human rights of the Afghans and Iraqis. While the humanitarian arguments, particularly those advanced in defense of Operation Iraqi Freedom, were rejected by many of R2Ps more prominent supporters\(^5^4\), the damage to the international repute of humanitarian intervention was enormous creating what Weiss describes as a ‘poisonous’ atmosphere in the General Assembly. The justifications offered for the invasion of Iraq greatly tarnished humanitarian intervention by exposing its relationship to power and Realpolitik. The fact that the invasion of Iraq was so universally unpopular, and the strategy employed by the coalition forces so manifestly counter to any notion that this operation brought humanitarian benefits, demonstrated that even in a unipolar setting where the sole superpower exercised unprecedented power and avowed progressive, humanitarian intentions, there was no guarantee that humanitarian norms like R2P could be realized consistently and not misused. Thus, by 2004 the new norm of intervention precipitated by the end of the Cold War was unsurprisingly seen by many as an entitlement afforded only to certain states – the US and its allies – rather than a new universal principle. The invasion of Iraq was thus conceptualized as the logical progression of a trend which pre-dated the Bush Presidency. Indicatively, according to Nigel White, “In many ways the Iraq crisis of 2003 was the culmination of a decade of pressure by the US and UK directed at changing the legal framework governing the use of force contained in the UN Charter, in a concerted effort to widen both exceptions to the ban on the threat or use of force.”\(^5^5\)

America’s unipolar moment was arguably the most propitious context for the emergence and implementation of R2P yet the invasion of Iraq and the non-intervention of Darfur demonstrated that even this unique coincidence of factors – structural and ideological – did not ensure either the universal acceptance, or implementation, of R2P. Intervention with the P5’s consent remained a function of political will and expediency and, given the power of the US, intervention could take place without this consent provided the hegemon was so inclined. Clearly the shift away from unipolarity to multipolarity must mean that the prospects for the consistent application of R2P are further reduced; if the norm of intervention encapsulated by R2P did not achieve implementation in the context of the dominance of one democratic state favorably disposed to the general ethos of the concept, then the increased influence of considerably less democratic states with a much more cautious view of humanitarian intervention such as China

\(^{5^3}\) Layne (2006), 41.
\(^{5^4}\) Evans (2008), 69.
\(^{5^5}\) White (2004), 660.
and Russia must surely diminish the prospects of R2P’s realization. Thus, while the policies of the Bush administration were in themselves disheartening, situating them in the context of the structural evolution of the international system adds yet further cause for concern.

It was primarily the structure of the international system, therefore, that both ensured the emergence of the norm facilitating humanitarian intervention and, crucially, its specific beneficiaries and manner of (erratic) implementation. This contingency inherent in the new norm, however, is not in any respects peculiar to this issue and this era. Rather, this conforms to the historical trend whereby the prevailing framework of acceptable practices within the international arena at any given time is determined by the great power(s). With respects to the UN and specifically the Security Council, Herbert Briggs noted that the framers of the Charter sought to ensure that the new organization would “work with, rather than in opposition to, the realities of power.” The power of the Security Council at the zenith of the new system and the constitutional competencies at their disposal meant that, “...the Security Council was left free to interpret what it meant to promote international peace and security.” Gerry Simpson argued that the loosening of restrictions on intervention manifest after the Cold War constituted “…not a general, universalisable right to humanitarian intervention but a special right on the part of the Great Powers to intervene in such cases.” This is, he argues, a form of ‘legalised hegemony’ which has always been a feature of international society whereby the particular norms prevalent at any given time are a reflection of the systemic configuration.

As the power of the US has gradually decreased – though this should not be exaggerated – concomitant change in the practice of intervention is apparent. Russia’s intervention in Georgia in 2008 – defended by the Kremlin as a humanitarian intervention to prevent “genocide” – signaled a new provocative boldness while China’s increasing influence in Africa greatly impacted on the Security Council’s response to certain cases, most notably Darfur. These developments clearly run counter to the hoped-for trajectory of R2P and are worrying – if perhaps unsurprising – consequences of the emerging systemic alignment. The Chinese view of R2P as articulated during the 2009 General Assembly debate on the issue, points to a definite, principled objection to the key tenets underpinning the concept. During the debate China stated, “…the implementation of the responsibility to protect should not contravene the principle of state sovereignty and the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of States…There must be no wavering with regard to the principles of respect for state sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of states.” Quite how R2P can be implemented without challenging “the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of States” is unclear. The statement went on to state with respects to the legitimate authorization of intervention, “…no state must be allowed to unilaterally implement R2P” and “…the Security Council…must make

judgments and decisions tailored to specific circumstances and must act prudently. Here it must be pointed out that the responsibility entrusted to the Council by the Charter is the maintenance of international peace and security.”

Thus, China continues to recognize the primacy of the Security Council and accepts no obligation either to intervene or protect human rights. With respects to even the use of R2P as a means by which moral pressure can be applied to offending states China warned, “...states must avoid using the responsibility to protect as a diplomatic tool to exert pressure on others.”

Given this statement it is difficult to see how the rise of China can be viewed as anything other than the death knell of R2P.

While the Security Council did authorize a no-fly zone over Libya in March 2011 this cannot be cited as evidence of the ascendancy of R2P. Security Council Resolution 1973 authorizing the no-fly zone does not make any reference to the international community’s responsibility to protect citizens in Libya but rather sanctions action on the basis of the pre-existing powers vested in the Security Council through Chapter VI and VII. Additionally, it is clear that, in contrast to both NATO’s intervention in Kosovo in 1999 and the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the consent of the Security Council was a sine qua non for the US. This determination to act through the Security Council contrasts with the Bush-era a la carte approach to the Council and is arguably further evidence of the shifting polarity. While in this instance China and Russia were disinclined to oppose the action the decision to intervene was a function of a confluence of interests amongst the P5 rather than adherence to a principle. The lack of action in response to the crises in Syria and the Ivory Coast points to the highly subjective nature of Security Council decision-making; while the lack of similar action in these two cases does not necessarily mean that the intervention in Libya cannot by definition count as a humanitarian intervention, the fact that the US decided to act in this case alone and only with the consent of Russia and China highlights the highly contingent nature of intervention and, ultimately, the secondary importance of R2P. Beyond vague hortatory allusions to the term, there is very little concrete evidence to suggest that the existence of R2P compelled the US, France and the UK to take action against Libya. Likewise, it is frankly inconceivable that Russia and China chose to abstain so as to preserve the integrity of R2P.

Thus, when charting the evolution of R2P we must acknowledge the role played by structural change and in particular the shift from bipolarity to unipolarity and now the emerging multipolarity. With an emerging multipolar system, it is likely the willingness of great powers to make use of such a doctrine will decrease, leaving the future of R2P very much in doubt. Multipolar systems, by their nature, greatly increase the likelihood of great power conflict, make deterrence more difficult, face coordination problems among states, make balancing and relative gains calculations more difficult, and lead to instability and constant misperception. As the era of American hegemony comes to an end, new strategic and security concerns at the national level will outweigh the humanitarian spirit that existed, even if only in a rhetorical sense, throughout the unipolar moment.

Conclusion

61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
63 Formally China and Russia “abstained” in the vote on Resolution 1973.
64 For a more in-depth discussion of the pitfalls of multipolarity, see Mearsheimer (1990).
R2P in the form originally conceived by the ICISS sought to create a means by which the Security Council would accept a formal responsibility to react to certain humanitarian crises. The concept was diluted, however, so that the variant of R2P recognized by states in 2005 and 2009 was no more than a restatement of international law. The Security Council has not accepted any duty to intervene and each of the P5 remain committed to deciding on a case-by-case basis how to respond. Such was the power of the US in the period of unipolarity that R2P, and the broader framework of benevolent interventionism into which it fits, was a useful rhetorical tool; the US could articulate an endorsement of the spirit of R2P whenever necessary both to facilitate Security Council mandated intervention, but also to justify unilateral intervention. No other state had this dual capacity. The fact that the US felt compelled to ‘go it alone’ in the war on terror was routinely justified in a markedly similar manner to the justifications proffered in 1999 when NATO intervened in Kosovo. The Security Council was denounced as a talking shop hamstringed by the nefarious agenda’s of China and Russia who were singled out as recalcitrant purveyors of Realpolitik. Frustrated with the often glacial pace of reform many argued that the necessary changes to the rules and norms governing the use of force could not be achieved through consensus. The willingness of China and Russia to veto any substantial reform came to be portrayed as self-interested spoiling by illiberal governments who reflect neither the wishes of their own citizens or world opinion.65 “Why” Bellamy asked prior to the war on terror, “…should undemocratic states with poor human rights records prevent a group of democratic states from protecting people in foreign countries?”66 It was argued, therefore, that change must be forced through by those ‘enlightened states’ that embody progressive moral rectitude.67 This was a theme happily advanced by Bush who, with typical bellicosity, stated, “We don’t really need the United Nation’s approval to act…When it comes to our security, we don’t need anyone’s permission.”68 Such denouncements of the formal legal power of Russia and China no longer make sense as the military and economic power of each grows. The ‘with us or against us’ rhetoric of the Bush administration is equally untenable and thus intervention – and hence R2P – is today dependant on far more factors than just the disposition of the US.

Given that the emergence of China and Russia has begun to challenge the unparalleled dominance of the US the currency of R2P is less assured. Many supporters of R2P argued that formal legal change was unnecessary; given the receptiveness of democratic states to moral pressure the solution to the problem of non-intervention – exemplified by Rwanda – was to generate global momentum around R2P which would ultimately feed into the foreign policies pursued by the US and its Western allies.69 Bellamy and Wheeler in fact argued that global civil society was “…the principal agent promoting humanitarian values in global politics”70 in the

66 A. Bellamy, Kosovo and International Society (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 212.
68 White (2004), 646.
70 Quoted in D. Chandler, Constructing Global Civil Society: Morality and Power in International Relations (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 47.
post Cold War era. While in our view this is a dubious claim, even if it were true the central point advanced in this article – the importance of structural change on the evolution and implementation of R2P – still means that even if global civil society were responsible for the emergence of the new norm of intervention the rise of China and Russia must necessarily diminish the capacity of this norm to consolidate its position let alone continue its ascendency. In contrast to the US neither China nor Russia have a significant domestic constituency supportive of a muscular humanitarianism and even if they did the governments are not receptive to the lobbying of either domestic or global civil society. Nor do these states have an inclination to “spread their values” or alter the domestic political systems of other states. With the emergence of these new powers wedded to a narrow set of foreign policy priorities far removed from the expansive idealism of R2P and a structural shift towards a multipolar system, the future of the norm is bleak.

As John Mueller notes, states will intervene “only when their interests seem importantly engaged or where they manage to become self-entrapped.” China and Russia’s interests are significantly less humanitarian than the US’s, particularly if a multipolar structure is on the horizon. The diminution of the power and influence of R2P’s chief sponsor through the continuing structural realignment currently underway must, therefore, have grave implications. It would, of course, be an exaggeration to claim that the US was an unwavering supporter of R2P or that R2P was solely born from US strategic thinking but the basic principles it encapsulates – primarily the use of force to protect human rights – is a conspicuously Western norm. As the end of the Cold War saw the demise of communism as a viable ideology, so too perhaps does the diminution of the US herald the end of R2P and the ethos it represents.

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