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Syria & Responsibility to Protect: Time for a Middle Ground

By Yang Razali Kassim

Synopsis

As the crisis in Syria edges towards civil war, the international community is locked in a stalemate over whether and how to intervene to stop the carnage. There is an urgent need for a middle ground to unblock the diplomatic quagmire.

Commentary

FRUSTRATED. IMPATIENT. Those were the two words Kofi Annan used last week to express anguish over his apparent helplessness to push through a ceasefire in the blood-letting in Syria. As a joint special envoy of the United Nations and the Arab League, Annan's frustration reflected that of the international community. It seems the world can only look on as the Assad regime rages on with impunity in its bloody crushing of the people's uprising.

Annan's exasperation is a tragic reflection of the UN's excruciating stalemate in Syria despite the world body's fledgling doctrine of humanitarian intervention, called the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), which it adopted in 2005. But why should we be surprised at this diplomatic quagmire?

R2P mishandled

One wonders whether plans for international humanitarian intervention would face such a big hurdle in Syria had R2P not been mishandled in Libya last year. To be sure, that ground-breaking intervention in Libya to protect unarmed civilians from the atrocities of the Gaddafi regime was the right thing to do. Defenceless people inspired by events in neighbouring Tunisia and Egypt during the Arab Spring were being massacred as they rose up to be free of autocratic rule.

The decision to intervene in Libya won wide support, including from the Arab League. Even the main detractors of R2P, Russia and China, did not veto Resolutions 1970 and 1973 enabling intervention in Libya - primarily because there was assurance from the UN that it would not lead to regime change. That assurance was key: When R2P was first proposed in 2001 and then adopted by the UN in 2005, its proponents were at pains to stress that the new doctrine was not, and should not be, about regime change; it's about the international community's responsibility to protect civilians from mass atrocities.

But when Gaddafi fell and subsequently died at the hands of the rebels, the R2P detractors concluded that this

was not what they had voted for. The interventionists, especially France and Britain, argued in defence that the dynamics on the ground were such that Gaddafi's demise was an inevitable consequence of the civil strife.

But the Libyan experience changed the tide against R2P. Russia and China have since hardened their positions over intervention in Syria. They acted in tandem to veto initiatives they feared could lead to a replay of Libya and to the fall of Assad. The UN sees the Syria implosion as an internal crisis. Assad sees it as an external war imposed on his country, which he is obligated to defend.

There is now a blame-game of sorts as to who should share the responsibility with the Assad regime for the massacre in Syria. Such finger-pointing is futile. The truth of the matter is that while 191 countries had endorsed R2P in 2005 when their leaders met at the UN World Summit, many of them still harboured reservations about the R2P. The big suspicion is over the potential abuse of the doctrine – the fear of it being used to advance the strategic interests of the West, or to bring about regime change in its pursuit.

Unfortunately, the application – or rather misapplication - of R2P in Libya only lent weight to such scepticism. That is why countries like Russia and China have no compunction to openly justify their opposition to international humanitarian intervention in Syria on grounds of possible regime change.

The possibility of the Syrian crisis getting out of hand and leading to a conflagration in the region is also something to worry about. It has already spilled over into Lebanon.

Time for a middle ground

There is an urgent need for a middle ground. The international community should not stand idly by in the face of mass atrocities. Yet international humanitarian intervention must not be done in a way that would undermine the world's long-standing faith in the sovereignty of the state.

This is, no doubt, a monumental task, as events in Libya and Syria have starkly shown. But a way out must be found for the international community to live with a clear conscience.

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