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Selective humanitarianism: Sovereignty, power, and the politics of intervention in Libya and Syria (2011–present)

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Abstract
The contrasting international responses to the Libyan and Syrian uprisings of 2011 expose a fundamental contradiction at the heart of contemporary humanitarian intervention: the tension between state sovereignty and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). Although both crises emerged during the Arab Spring and involved large-scale violence against civilians, only Libya witnessed United Nations Security Council authorization for military intervention, while repeated vetoes prevented comparable action in Syria despite a far greater humanitarian catastrophe. This paper employs a qualitative comparative case study approach to examine why humanitarian intervention was authorized in one case but not the other. Drawing on international legal frameworks, UN Security Council deliberations, and existing scholarship, it argues that humanitarian norms are not applied uniformly but are mediated by great-power interests, geopolitical alignments, and the institutional politics of the Security Council. It further contends that the NATO-led intervention in Libya, and its evolution into regime change, reshaped Russian and Chinese perceptions of humanitarian intervention, contributing to sustained opposition to coercive measures in Syria. The study conceptualizes this pattern as selective humanitarianism, whereby humanitarian principles are invoked selectively according to strategic interests rather than consistently applied legal or moral standards. The findings demonstrate that the credibility of R2P remains constrained by power politics, highlighting the enduring challenge of reconciling humanitarian protection with the principles of state sovereignty and collective security.

Keywords: Selective humanitarianism, responsibility to protect (R2P), state sovereignty, Libya, Syria, humanitarian intervention, United Nations Security Council, great power politics

Introduction

The twenty-first century inherited an unresolved tension from the twentieth: the contest between state sovereignty, enshrined in Article 2 [4] and Article 2 [7] of the United Nations Charter, and the international community's growing willingness to act on behalf of civilians whose own governments fail or refuse to protect them. Nowhere is this tension more visible than in the divergent international responses to the Libyan and Syrian uprisings of 2011. Both crises erupted in the same year, as part of the broader Arab Spring; both saw governments respond to popular unrest with lethal force against civilians; and both, in their early months, generated similar international rhetoric about the need to prevent mass atrocities. Yet the outcomes could not have been more different. In Libya, the United Nations Security Council authorized "all necessary measures" to protect civilians within a month of large-scale violence, paving the way for a NATO-led military campaign that contributed to the fall of Muammar Gaddafi's government [1]. Alex Bellamy, writing shortly after the intervention, argued that Resolution 1973 marked a genuine shift in the Council's willingness to authorize force for human protection purposes, one which the architects of the Responsibility to Protect had hoped for but rarely seen delivered in practice [2]. In Syria, no comparable authorization ever followed. Instead, the Security Council became the site of repeated vetoes, primarily by Russia and China, beginning with a vetoed resolution just months into the crisis and recurring throughout the conflict [3]. By the time a ceasefire took hold over a decade later, the United Nations' own Commission of Inquiry estimated that more than 580,000 people had been killed and some 13 million displaced, making Syria the world's largest forced-displacement crisis of the period [4].

This paper compares the international responses to Libya and Syria in order to interrogate a central puzzle in contemporary international relations: why does the international community intervene to protect civilians in some crises and not in others, even when the humanitarian stakes appear broadly similar? Gareth Evans, the principal architect of the Responsibility to Protect doctrine, has argued that unchecked veto use in mass-atrocity situations is the single greatest threat to R2P's credibility, since it allows geopolitics to override the doctrine's founding premise that sovereignty entails responsibility [5]. Aidan Hehir has pressed this critique further, contending that R2P has raised international consciousness about mass atrocities without meaningfully improving the international response to them, precisely because the doctrine leaves the decision to act, or not to act, in the hands of the same veto-holding powers whose interests it was meant to constrain [6]. This paper builds on that critique. It argues that the divergence between Libya and Syria cannot be explained by humanitarian need alone, nor by a coherent and consistently applied legal doctrine. Rather, it is best explained by the interaction of great-power interests, geopolitical alignment, and the precedent-setting consequences of the Libyan intervention itself, which convinced Russia and China that Western-backed "humanitarian" interventions were vehicles for regime change. The result is what this paper terms selective humanitarianism: a pattern in which the invocation of humanitarian norms is genuine, but the application of those norms is filtered through the interests of the state's powerful enough to act on them. The paper proceeds in four parts. It first outlines the legal and theoretical relationship between sovereignty and the Responsibility to Protect doctrine; it then examines the Libyan and Syrian cases in turn; it compares the two cases to explain the divergence; and it concludes by considering what this divergence reveals about the practical limits of humanitarian intervention today.

Theoretical Framework: Sovereignty and the Responsibility to Protect

State sovereignty is unusual among international norms in being written directly into the constitutional text of the international system. Sovereignty, understood as the principle that states possess supreme authority within their own territory and are free from external interference, appears twice in the UN Charter of 1945: Article 2 [4] prohibits the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, and Article 2 [7] bars the United Nations itself from intervening in matters "essentially within the domestic jurisdiction" of a state. For much of the twentieth century, these provisions were read as near-absolute constraints on outside interference, a reading reinforced by the experience of decolonization, during which newly independent states guarded their sovereignty jealously against former colonial powers. Nicholas Wheeler's influential account of the era observed that this absolutist reading of sovereignty rested on a "pluralist" conception of international society, in which order between states was valued above the protection of individuals within them, and any softening of that principle was treated with deep suspicion by postcolonial states in particular [7].

The 1999 NATO intervention in Kosovo, undertaken without Security Council authorization after Russia signaled it would veto any resolution authorizing force, foreshadowed the central dilemma this paper examines. NATO justified its bombing campaign as a necessary response to Yugoslav ethnic cleansing of Kosovar Albanians, while critics maintained that the campaign violated the Charter's prohibition on the use of force absent Security Council approval. The Independent International Commission on Kosovo later captured the resulting dilemma by concluding that the intervention was "illegal but legitimate": illegal because it lacked Security Council authorization, but legitimate because diplomatic alternatives had been exhausted and the intervention prevented further atrocities [8]. This formulation exposed a gap between what an emerging humanitarian consensus seemed to demand and what existing international law authorized.

The Responsibility to Protect doctrine emerged partly as an attempt to close that gap by relocating humanitarian action within, rather than outside, the Security Council framework. Proposed in 2001 by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), R2P reframed sovereignty itself: rather than functioning as a shield against outside scrutiny, sovereignty would be understood as entailing a responsibility, so that a state which failed to protect its population, or was itself the perpetrator of atrocities, forfeited some of the protection sovereignty traditionally offered [9]. The doctrine was formally adopted by the UN General Assembly at the 2005 World Summit. Paragraph 138 of the Summit's Outcome Document affirmed that "each individual State has the responsibility to protect its populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity," while paragraph 139 extended a responsibility to the "international community," committing states to take "collective action, in a timely and decisive manner," through the Security Council, when peaceful means prove inadequate and national authorities are "manifestly failing" to protect their populations [10].

In 2009, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's report on implementing R2P organized the doctrine into three pillars: first, the responsibility of each state to protect its own population; second, the responsibility of the international community to assist states in meeting that obligation; and third, the responsibility of the international community to respond collectively, including through coercive measures authorized by the Security Council, when a state manifestly fails to protect its population [11]. Crucially, R2P did not create new legal authority for the use of force outside the existing Charter framework; the third pillar remained contingent on Security Council authorization, meaning that R2P's practical application would always be filtered through the same great-power veto politics that governed every other Security Council decision.

This structural feature of R2P is where competing scholarly accounts diverge most sharply. Liberal and constructivist scholars, including Bellamy, have generally treated R2P as evidence of genuine normative change: an emerging consensus that sovereignty is conditional on the protection of human rights, capable of constraining state behavior over time even among powerful actors. Aidan Hehir, by contrast, has argued that R2P functions largely as what he terms a "hollow norm," one that has raised international consciousness about mass atrocities without generating a reliable mechanism for acting on them, since it leaves the ultimate decision to act, or not to act, in the hands of the same veto-holding powers whose interests it was meant to constrain [12]. A further, more critical line of scholarship, associated particularly with Mahmood Mamdani, goes further still, arguing that R2P risks entrenching a bifurcated international order in which weaker states are treated as wards subject to external "trusteeship," while great powers and their allies remain effectively insulated from the same scrutiny [13]. The comparison between Libya and Syria offers a useful test of these competing claims, since both cases involved a similar normative claim, applied within an eighteen-month window, with sharply different outcomes.

Case Study One: Libya and the Promise of R2P

The Libyan uprising began in February 2011, part of the broader wave of protest then sweeping North Africa and the Middle East. Muammar Gaddafi's government responded with a rapid escalation of violence, including the use of military aircraft against protesters, and as forces loyal to Gaddafi advanced on the rebel-held city of Benghazi in March 2011, the government issued explicit threats of mass violence against the city's population. This threat, combined with a call from the League of Arab States for the Security Council to establish a no-fly zone, created the political conditions for rapid Security Council action [14]. Jennifer Welsh has argued that the speed of this response was itself remarkable: within roughly a month of large-scale violence breaking out, the Council had moved from expressions of concern to authorizing coercive military measures, a pace with few precedents in the Council's post–Cold War history [15].

On 17 March 2011, the Security Council adopted Resolution 1973, acting under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. The resolution demanded an immediate ceasefire, imposed a no-fly zone over Libyan airspace, strengthened the existing arms embargo, and, most significantly, authorized member states to take "all necessary measures. to protect civilians and civilian populated areas under threat of attack in the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya," while explicitly excluding "a foreign occupation force of any form on any part of Libyan territory." [16] The resolution passed with ten votes in favor and five abstentions, including from permanent members Russia and China, with no state voting against it. United States Ambassador Susan Rice characterized the resolution as a direct response to the League of Arab States' request and to the "urgent needs on the ground," framing the vote as an act of Security Council responsiveness to regional and humanitarian concern rather than unilateral Western action [17]. Bellamy similarly read the resolution as confirmation that RtoP had moved from rhetorical commitment to operational practice, describing it as evidence that the Council's "attitude toward the use of force for human protection purposes" had genuinely shifted [18].

In practice, however, the NATO-led military campaign that followed Resolution 1973 expanded well beyond the protection of civilians. Allied airstrikes targeted Gaddafi's command-and-control infrastructure directly, and NATO air power provided decisive support to rebel ground advances that ultimately toppled the Libyan government; Gaddafi himself was killed by opposition fighters in October 2011. Welsh's own assessment of the campaign was more guarded than Bellamy's: she cautioned that the manner in which the mandate was implemented risked collapsing the distinction between protecting civilians and pursuing regime change, a distinction she considered essential to RtoP's long-term credibility [19]. The abstaining states, particularly Russia and China, subsequently argued that the coalition had exceeded its mandate, using a civilian-protection resolution as cover for regime change. This perception proved consequential far beyond Libya itself: it hardened Russian and Chinese resistance to any future resolution that might be similarly stretched, a dynamic that became apparent almost immediately once the Syrian crisis reached the Security Council later that same year.

Case Study Two: Syria and the Limits of R2P

The Syrian uprising began in March 2011, within weeks of the Libyan crisis, as protests against the government of Bashar al-Assad spread across the country and were met with a violent crackdown. By October 2011, an estimated 2,700 people had already been killed [20]. Unlike in Libya, however, the Security Council did not authorize forceful measures. On 4 October 2011, a draft resolution condemning the Syrian government's use of force against civilians was vetoed by Russia and China, with China's ambassador arguing that the text was overly focused on pressuring Damascus and risked escalating tensions rather than resolving them [20]. This was the first of what became a long series of vetoes. Simon Adams, writing for the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, characterized the Council's subsequent record on Syria as an outright "failure to protect," arguing that repeated vetoes did not merely fail to prevent atrocities but actively signaled to the Syrian government that it could act with impunity [21]. By 2019, Russia had used its veto thirteen times specifically to block Security Council action on Syria, and by one authoritative count, of nineteen Russian vetoes cast since 2011, fourteen concerned Syria, while eight of China's nine vetoes in the same period were also on Syria [22].

The consequences of this Security Council paralysis became starkly visible in August 2013. A year after President Barack Obama had publicly warned that the use of chemical weapons by the Syrian government would constitute a "red line" carrying "enormous consequences," Syrian government forces launched a sarin gas attack on the rebel-held Damascus suburb of Ghouta, killing an estimated 1,400 people [23]. Despite the scale of the attack, and despite preparations within the United States government for military strikes, no Security Council authorization for the use of force followed, and domestic political resistance in the United States and the United Kingdom led Washington to pursue a diplomatic solution instead: a Russian-brokered agreement under which the Syrian government agreed to surrender its declared chemical weapons stockpile, averting the military confrontation that had appeared imminent [24]. Thomas Weiss argued that this episode confirmed what Aidan Hehir had termed the "permanence of inconsistency" in Security Council decision-making: R2P's application would continue to track the coincidence of political interest and humanitarian need on a case-by-case basis, rather than any principled or predictable standard, meaning that "Syria is not Libya" in the Council's practice regardless of the comparable severity of the two crises [25]. The chemical weapons deal removed a substantial quantity of nerve agents from Syria, but Assad's government was subsequently accused of using chemical weapons again in later years, including attacks that prompted limited, unilateral American, British, and French military responses undertaken outside any Security Council authorization [24].

Beyond the question of military intervention, Russian and Chinese vetoes also repeatedly blocked humanitarian measures with a far more limited scope than Resolution 1973. Vetoes were used to block resolutions renewing the mechanism to investigate chemical weapons use, to prevent referral of the situation to the International Criminal Court, and, on multiple occasions, to restrict the cross-border delivery of humanitarian aid to millions of displaced Syrians, with China explicitly justifying its position by invoking the principles of state sovereignty and non-interference in Syria's internal affairs [26]. By the time the Syrian Network for Human Rights published its comprehensive accounting of Security Council vetoes in 2020, it estimated that Russian and Chinese vetoes had coincided with the deaths of nearly a quarter of a million Syrians and the arrest of roughly 150,000 others, figures that illustrate the human cost of the Council's inability to act [27].

Comparative Analysis: Explaining the Divergence

The contrast between Libya and Syria cannot be explained by the relative scale of humanitarian need; both crises involved government forces using lethal force against civilian populations, and the Syrian civil war went on to kill vastly more people than the Libyan conflict. Nor can it be explained by a principled distinction in international law, since Resolution 1973 and the various vetoed Syria resolutions invoked substantially the same humanitarian and civilian-protection language. Aidan Hehir's analysis of the Libyan intervention anticipated this problem directly: he argued that Resolution 1973 should not be read as evidence that R2P had become an operative legal or normative constraint on the Security Council, but rather as one more instance in a longer pattern in which the Council's five permanent members act on the basis of "politics and pragmatism rather than principles," producing a record of "inertia punctuated by aberrant flashes of resolve" whenever humanitarian need happens to coincide with great-power interest [28]. Syria, on this reading, was not an aberration from R2P's logic but a confirmation of it.

Derek Averre and Lance Davies, examining Russia's conduct on Syria specifically, found that Moscow's vetoes were driven by a combination of strategic interest and genuine doctrinal objection: Russia regarded Syria as a core ally in the Middle East and viewed Western-backed intervention as a direct threat to that relationship, while also treating the Libyan precedent as proof that Security Council authorizations for civilian protection could not be trusted to remain limited in scope [29]. This dual motivation helps explain why the divergence between the two cases was so sharp. First, geopolitical stakes differed sharply: Syria under Assad has long been one of Russia's closest remaining allies in the Middle East, hosting Russia's only Mediterranean naval facility, while Libya under Gaddafi had no comparable patron among the Security Council's permanent members willing to expend political capital on his behalf. Russia's abstention on Libya reflected the absence of a vital interest at stake; its repeated vetoes on Syria reflect the presence of one.

Second, the Libyan precedent itself reshaped Russian and Chinese calculations going forward. Having watched a civilian-protection mandate expand into a campaign that removed Gaddafi from power, Moscow and Beijing became far less willing to grant the Security Council similarly open-ended authority, fearing that any resolution authorizing force in Syria would likewise be used to engineer regime change against an ally. Russian officials repeatedly cited the Libyan experience to justify their subsequent Syria vetoes, arguing that the Council had already demonstrated it could not be trusted to respect the limits of its own mandates [29]. In this sense, Libya did not simply fail to establish a durable precedent for humanitarian intervention; it actively undermined the prospects for future Security Council-authorized intervention by demonstrating to skeptical permanent members exactly the risk they had feared.

Third, the structure of R2P's third pillar, which routes any coercive response through the Security Council and its veto-wielding permanent members, means that the doctrine's application will always be hostage to the alignment of great-power interests in any given case. Ramesh Thakur's retrospective assessment of R2P's first fifteen years reached a similar conclusion, noting that persistent scepticism about the doctrine stems less from disagreement over its underlying principles than from its demonstrated inability to guarantee "timely, decisive and effective assistance to any group in need of protection" when a veto-holder's interests point the other way [30]. This partially vindicates the realist-inflected critiques advanced by Hehir and Thakur: R2P provided a shared vocabulary that all sides in both the Libyan and Syrian debates could invoke, but it did not generate the political will to act in Syria once that action ran contrary to the strategic interests of a veto-wielding power. At the same time, the fact that R2P language was used consistently by both interventionist and non-interventionist states suggests the liberal-constructivist account defended by Bellamy is not entirely mistaken either: the norm shaped how states justified their positions to the rest of the international community, even when it did not determine the outcome. Mamdani's critique adds a further, sharper dimension to this picture: the pattern observed across Libya and Syria is consistent with his broader argument that R2P tends to be invoked most forcefully against weaker states that lack a great-power patron, while allies of veto-holders remain effectively insulated from it regardless of the severity of their conduct [31].

Conclusion

The comparison between Libya and Syria demonstrates that the relationship between humanitarian intervention and state sovereignty in the twenty-first century is not governed by a single, consistently applied doctrine, but by a norm, the Responsibility to Protect, whose application remains contingent on the alignment of great-power interests within the UN Security Council. Libya briefly appeared to validate the promise of R2P, showing that the international community could act quickly and decisively to prevent an anticipated atrocity, a reading Bellamy and other liberal-constructivist scholars have continued to defend even after Syria, arguing that the broader pattern of Security Council practice since 2005 still points to the gradual emergence of "habits of protection" across many crises, not just the two examined here [32]. Syria demonstrated the limits of that promise just as clearly: when a veto-wielding power has a strategic stake in the outcome, and particularly when that power has already watched a civilian-protection mandate used to accomplish regime change, the same normative language that authorized intervention in Libya can be, and has been, used to block intervention entirely.

This has consequences that extend beyond either case. If the practical availability of humanitarian intervention depends on whether a crisis happens to intersect with the interests of the Security Council's permanent members, then sovereignty in the twenty-first century is protected unevenly: robust for states aligned with a veto power, conditional for those that are not. Hehir's warning that this "permanence of inconsistency" would persist beyond Libya has, on the available evidence, held up: the same dynamic has continued to shape international responses to subsequent crises, from Myanmar to Ukraine, in ways that echo the Libya-Syria divergence [33]. Any effort to make the relationship between sovereignty and humanitarian protection more consistent will need to grapple directly with the structure of the veto itself, rather than with the substantive content of R2P, if the doctrine's founding promise, that sovereignty entails responsibility, is to be realized more evenly than it was in Syria.

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