

Misunderstanding the UN

Your editorial (“Yes, the UN has a duty to intervene. But when, where and how?”, last week) wrongly equates the internationally endorsed “responsibility to protect” (R2P) principle with what was once termed “humanitarian intervention”, and misunderstands the underpinnings of a concept that was endorsed by the international community at the 2005 World Summit.

When quoting Sergei Lavrov’s comment: “Foreign intervention into domestic matters is unacceptable”, you ignore the fact that R2P was conceptualised as reinforcing a state’s sovereignty, but iterating that sovereignty demands responsibility, crucially, a responsibility to protect populations within a national boundary. This is the first of R2P’s three founding pillars.

Where a state lacks the capacity to protect civilians comprehensively, pillar two tasks the international community with supporting that state. It is only in pillar three, when a state is unwilling to protect civilians, or is perpetrating crimes against them, that collective international force is sanctioned and, only then, after other means have been exhausted.

R2P is thus as much a tool for prevention as it is for intervention and, like the United Nations itself, is only as effective as the member states that support it. Syria is a case in point.

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