

# The Russian Stand on the Responsibility to Protect: Does Strategic Culture Matter?

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## Abstract

Though Russia has approved the doctrine of responsibility to protect (R2P) in the UN platforms it has often been placed rightly in the ‘sceptics group’ of states that are not at ease with the premises and practices of R2P. What is the basis of the Russian discontent? This article suggests the relevance of strategic culture in explaining the Russian position on R2P. It is based on the assertion that, in addition to humanitarian and moral aspects, responding to mass atrocities within the doctrine of R2P takes place in a context of security considerations since, in severe cases, it involves, among others, a military component under a UN Security Council mandate. As such the use of force, approving or disapproving, it is all related to the realm of security even if the motive and objective may be humanitarian. In the security domain, this article argues that Russian strategic culture, in interaction with its national identity, historical experiences and prevailing narratives, forms a loose code of conduct and a context within which strategic decisions concerning the use of force in responding to a humanitarian crisis are made. It is, thus, concluded that Russian strategic culture by constraining decision-makers, defining appropriate behaviour and reflecting insecurities and aspirations explains Russia’s approach to R2P’s normative propositions, legal standing and implementation in practice.

## Keywords

Responsibility to protect, humanitarian intervention, strategic culture, Russian strategic culture, Russian foreign policy, norm contestation

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## **Introduction**

The post-Cold War cases of intervention in humanitarian crises, even if driven by moral concerns, were put into a legal cloth by arguing that such crises posed a threat to international peace and security. Based on this premise, the UN Security Council resolutions on Iraq, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Somalia and Haiti authorised the use of force since the situation in the respective cases constituted a threat to international peace and security. Similarly, Resolution 1973, the first and the last case that specifically implemented the coercive element of responsibility to protect (R2P), authorised use of force to protect civilians in Libya referring that the situation on the ground threatened international peace and security.

This linkage established by the Security Council between humanitarian crises and maintaining international peace and security bears witness that responding to such crises is not only a moral issue but also a decision that carries a security dimension. Simply because such responses under a UN mandate involve a military component, and they are deemed legally justified on the ground to maintain international peace and security by coercive means as envisaged in the UN Charter. Yet, the literature on humanitarian intervention and, more recently, R2P overlooks security paradigms of states within which decisions about humanitarian or R2P-based interventions are made. The conditions for the success of a military intervention in a humanitarian crisis and possible repercussions of it on the ground in explaining states' involvement or non-involvement in the humanitarian intervention cases have been widely discussed (Kuperman, 2013; Paris, 2014). Besides, states' inclinations to use humanitarian intervention to expand their interest or their refrainment from taking part due to their calculation of costs and benefits have also been debated (Chandler, 2004; Kurtz & Rotmann, 2016). But the relationship between states' position on how to respond to humanitarian crises and their strategic culture has not been explored. States' actions or no-actions in a humanitarian crisis in terms of a military intervention sanctioned by the doctrine of R2P is likely to be influenced by their strategic culture since such decisions are not only a moral one but also involves a security dimension. In the security realm, the prevailing strategic culture constrains decision-makers, defines appropriate behaviour and reflects insecurities and aspirations. Thus, to understand the states' approach to humanitarian crises that call for military intervention within R2P a perspective that brings strategic culture in will shed new light onto the debate.

This article will pursue this with reference to Russia's stand on R2P. Russia, though approved R2P at its outset in principle and cooperated with the Western world to elevate the idea, has gradually come to be sceptical if not oppositional to the doctrine (Bellamy, 2009, p. 113; Ziegler, 2016a, p. 75). The Russian position has evolved arguing that the adaption of R2P as a norm would result in weakening state sovereignty, undermine international order and enhance the dominant position of the West with significant damages on Russian national interest. The legacy of the Cold War and growing confrontational politics between Russia and the West during the Putin era has enhanced the Russian scepticism about Western

created norms like R2P, and the likelihood of the Western powers cynically using R2P to advance their interest often at the expense of Russia. This article, inspired by constructivist studies in international relations, argues for the relevance of Russia's strategic culture, a thoroughly ignored standpoint in the literature, in explaining the critical position of Russia on R2P, a concept which is increasingly viewed from a security perspective by the Russian policy makers.

In this framework, first, I will examine the emergence and evolution of R2P as an attempt to construct a new norm conducting humanitarian responsibilities of states. Then, I will present Russian strategic culture as a concept that constrains and guides decision-makers concerning security related issues including coercive humanitarian policies. In so doing I will explain reluctance of Russia to the expansion of the concept and its usage in international politics, particularly by Western powers. I also will demonstrate that Russia's stand on R2P is instrumental, informed by its perception of threat and opportunities in international relations as it is inclined to use a language very akin to R2P in order to justify its interventions in Georgia, Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. I will conclude that Russia's sense of threat, perception of the external world, and positioning vis-à-vis the West while constituting its strategic culture have also come to shape its attitude towards the doctrine of R2P.

## **Responsibility to Protect: Consent and Contestation**

Even though the doctrine of R2P was developed in the early twenty-first century to address the prevailing question of mass atrocities brought about by intrastate and ethnic conflicts throughout the world in the aftermath of the Cold War, its ideational roots can be traced back to just war theory (Prat & Saxon, 2015, pp. 139–140) and its practice to the nineteenth century Europe (Hehir, 2010, p. 26; Weiss & Collins, 1996, p. 17). Influenced by the views that while intervention to another 'civilised state' is not legitimate, intervention to 'barbarous nations' with an illiberal government that inflicts violence on its population is justifiable (Doyle, 2015, pp. 102–108; Jackson, 1990, p. 185), major European powers claimed a moral and political right to intervene in the domestic affairs of other 'uncivilised' states' (Ottoman Empire in particular) to save strangers (Rodogno, 2012). Hence, by the end of the nineteenth century many legal scholars in the West held the view that humanitarian intervention existed in the customary international law (International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty [ICISS], 2001, p. 17).

Despite the atrocities and agonies brought by the World War II and the subsequent Genocide Convention of 1948, the bi-polar Cold War period that ensued was not a time of military interventions justified by humanitarian considerations. This trend shifted unprecedentedly with the collapse of the Eastern bloc and the emergence of the United States as the sole hegemon of the world. The end of the Cold War marked not only the removal of obstacles (the USSR veto in

UN Security Council) before humanitarian interventions but also the surge of humanitarian catastrophes throughout the world, from the civil wars in former Yugoslavia to genocide in Rwanda. As a result, how to respond to humanitarian crises around the world turned up as an important, yet a controversial, issue in the international politics of the 1990s (Hehir, 1998, p. 52).

Regardless of the broad support for the international community to prevent mass atrocity crimes like genocides, a sense of scepticism about the real motivation of the Western states that intervened in humanitarian crises remained. Distrust became particularly apparent with the 1999 NATO bombing of Yugoslavia, a response to the alleged ethnic cleansing of the Albanian population in Kosovo. This unilateral military action that some legal scholars described as 'illegal yet legitimate' (The Independent International Commission on Kosovo, 2000) was controversial not only because it was a unilateral intervention of NATO without a UN Security Council mandate but also the military operations were conducted despite strong Russian opposition demonstrating clearly for the first time in the aftermath of the Cold War and the lack of uniformity in the international arena concerning humanitarian intervention.

With the NATO intervention to Yugoslavia, the dispute over the legality of humanitarian interventions as well as the limits of state sovereignty reached its peak. During the height of the discussion, Kofi Annan, the then UN Secretary General, addressed the General Assembly in 2000 asking: 'If humanitarian interventions are, indeed, an unacceptable assault on sovereignty, how should we respond to a Rwanda, to a Srebrenica -to gross and systematic violations of human rights that offend every aspect of our common humanity?' (United Nations, 2000).

In response to the call of the Secretary General, the ICISS was formed under the auspices of the Canadian government in an attempt to build a new international consensus on how to react to massive violations of human rights (International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty, 2001, p. 9). The commission, comprised of experts from around the world including the Russian diplomat and politician Vladimir Lukin, published its report in 2001 posing a serious challenge to the absolutist understanding of sovereignty by redefining it as 'responsibility'. According to the report, first and foremost, the responsibility of the state was to protect its populations from mass atrocities. If the state was unable or unwilling to protect its citizens the ICISS report asserted that the responsibility would pass on to the international community. In this way, international coercive measures to be taken in order to protect populations from mass atrocities could not be interpreted as an intervention to a rightfully 'sovereign entity' since sovereignty becomes void with the failure to protect (Prat & Saxon, 2015, pp. 139–142).

Referred to by Western states as an 'emerging norm' of international law (United Nations, 2004) the doctrine of R2P was adopted unanimously by heads of state and governments in the World Summit of 2005 meeting as the General Assembly of the United Nations. In comparison with the ICISS's report, the doctrine of R2P was significantly narrowed down in the Outcome Document that also clarified some ambiguities in order to find an agreement with the sceptical non-Western world, specifically Russia. In this context, the Document determined that in order to use coercive means as a last resort in response to a particular case

the UN Security Council authorisation is mandatory, a provision that secured the Russian support as a permanent member of the council with a veto power. Moreover, the document named four atrocity crimes that warranted the utilisation of R2P: genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity narrowing down the scope of the doctrine.

As concluded in the Outline Document of 2005, R2P consists of three pillars. The first pillar affirms the responsibility of each sovereign state to protect its populations from mass atrocities. The second pillar acknowledges the responsibility of the international community in times of crisis to assist sovereign states in fulfilling their responsibility. The last and most controversial pillar deals with the proper international response in a case where a sovereign state through omission or commission 'manifestly fails to fulfil its responsibility' to protect their population from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity. If after all the peaceful means in accordance with the UN Charter's Chapters VI and VIII are exhausted, the international community, through the Security Council, should be prepared to take collective action in accordance with Chapter VII (United Nations, 2005).

R2P was subsequently endorsed by the UNSC Resolution 1674 (28-April-2006) with the support of all five Permanent Member States including Russia that affirmed the doctrine of R2P (Bellamy et. al., 2010). Then, the question emerges as to why and when Russia has grown critical of the doctrine of R2P despite the fact that it had endorsed it in the UN General Assembly and Security Council. The answer to this question requires scrutinizing Russia's evolving strategic culture in recent years as the ground for its changing position on such an international norm creation and its practices that appears clash with prevailing Russian strategic culture.

## **Russian Strategic Culture**

Strategic culture brings identities, ideas and narratives in theorising about international politics. It is based on an assumption that states cannot be viewed as purely rational actors seeking to maximise interest, and that a cultural approach is needed to fully make sense of their behaviour in the realm of foreign and security affairs (Snyder, 1977; Wendt, 1999). Following this premise, Gray (1981, p. 35) approaches strategic culture as 'modes of thought and action with respect to force, which derives from the perception of the national historical experience, from aspirations in national terms and even from civic culture/way of life'. Based on the perception of the self and the other, shared ideas, emotional responses and patterns of habitual behaviour acquired by a national strategic community lay the ground for the foundation of strategic culture (Snyder, 1977, p. 8). As such, Johnston (1995, p. 46) broadly describes the concept as an 'ideational milieu which limits behavioural choices' of a state. Yet, more specifically, a strategic culture perspective primarily focuses on security issues paying special attention to the views about the use of force and threat perception to understand state's behaviour presuming that a prevailing strategic culture constrains

decision-makers, defines appropriate behaviour and reflects insecurities (Longhurst, 2004; Meyer, 2006). In sum, strategic culture consists of a number of shared beliefs, perceptions and ideas concerning the security environment as well as codes and attitudes, and patterns of behaviour towards the outside world in the form of responses to overcome threats and attain security.

The dominant Russian strategic culture with a brief exception during the 1990s has had a strong expansionist, revisionist, conspiratorial and anti-Western orientation with a conservative and realist outlook (Averre & Davies, 2015; Kosmarskaya, 2011; Lytvynenko, 2013). Its resultant characteristics is that of ‘an almost obsessive perception of a general threat towards Russian sovereignty and territorial integrity’ (Eitelhuber, 2009, p. 27). Such an angst towards the outside world leads to a ‘Russian logic of besieged fortress’ (Igumnova, 2011, p. 264), famously elaborated by Alexander III that Russia had only two allies, its army and the navy, as well as in Lenin’s proclamation that ‘we are surrounded on all sides by enemies, and we have to advance almost constantly under their fire’ (Bathurst, 1981, p. 29). As mentioned by George Kennan in his famous X article’ (1947), Russia has been pronounced with a sense of perpetual vulnerability in the face of malicious foreign enemies and their internal collaborators (Ermath, 2006; Igumnova, 2011). Hence, the prevailing Russian security perception that generates a general distrust for the external world is that Russia is ‘surrounded by domestic and foreign enemies with aims to erode the stability of the regime (...) undermining the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Russian Federation’ (Sinovets, 2016, p. 421).

International relations are, thus, perceived to be a strictly zero-sum game between eternal rivals in which a political achievement of the West viewed as a threatening loss for Russia (Sinovets, 2016). Meanwhile, the view that ‘Russia can be an Empire, or it can be nothing’ (Morenkova-Perrier, 2014, p. 32) gives way to a division of the world into spheres of influences in which Russia is destined to enjoy hegemony in certain regions. In this regard, the ‘near abroad policy’ of Russia is exclusively based on the self-appointed idea that Russia has a legitimate sphere of influence within the post-Soviet territories due to its historical and cultural legacies (Antczak, 2018) which licenses the use of force against countries like Georgia and Ukraine seeking a pro-Western orientation (Morenkova-Perrier, 2014).

In the construction of contemporary Russian strategic culture, the West as the ultimate and threatening other has played a salient role (Igumnova, 2011; Tichy, 2017). Russian identity trying to come to terms with the West has deeply influenced its strategic culture of insecurity vis-à-vis the West (Tsygankov, 2019). The revival of Eurasianism as an ideological and civilisation alternative (Papava, 2013) has been a response to its perceived vulnerability in the world, and towards the West in particular. Even though the genesis of Eurasianist thought dates back to the late nineteenth century, its influence on Russia had remained rather marginal until the last decade (Lewis, 2019). In the broadest sense, Eurasianism renouncing Western materialism and decadence dismisses a Western-inspired society and polity, and instead, advocates for the conservation of the Eurasian spirit inherited from the uniqueness of Russian history (Papava, 2013). In rejecting the West, depicted as a

capitalist, imperialist and soulless monolith, Russian Eurasianists are confident that Russia would be the order-setting country in the region, a view perfectly illustrated by Sergey Alexandrovich Karaganov who claims that with the rise of Eurasianism Russia has switched ‘from being the periphery of Europe, (...) into the centre of Greater Eurasia’ (quoted in Lewis, 2018, p. 1620). The impact of Eurasianism is also apparent in the views of Sergiy Lavrov, the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, who in sharp contrast to his earlier views, argued in 2016 that the ‘Russian people possessed a cultural matrix of their own, an original type of spirituality and never merged with the West’ (quoted in Pearce, 2018, p. 88).

The president Vladimir Putin too, in his early years in power, did not view the West as an adversary and instead hoped to integrate with it. This is best demonstrated by Putin’s own remarks during his first years in office. Indeed, it was Putin who rejected to view NATO as an enemy (Laruelle, 2016) while affirming that ‘a course of integration with Europe will be one of the main directions of our foreign policy’ (quoted in Bonnett, 2009, p. 59). Yet Putin’s consolidation of power in Russia, the eastward expansion of NATO and the EU towards post-Soviet territories and lastly the independence of Kosovo and intervention in Libya galvanised Russian anti-Westernism to a degree where Kanet (2019, p. 191–192) claims ‘the government decided that achieving security and foreign policy objectives on the basis of cooperation with the West was impossible’. This stand has become discernible recently in Putin’s conservative/nationalist turn reflecting that the Russian feeling of encirclement has been galvanised, and thus, its anti-Westernism (Kanet, 2019; Laruelle, 2016). As a Russian observer stated in relation to the US, ‘for the elites [in Russia] anti-Americanism is now as proper as wearing pants’ (quoted in Barry, 2009).

All in all, these characteristics of Russian strategic culture has set an ideational milieu which guides its policy choices concerning Russian approach towards R2P, constrains decision makers by encouraging and discouraging particular policy paths, and defines appropriate behaviour.

## **Understanding the Russian Stance on R2P**

### *Between Consent and Contestation*

With the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the Eastern communist bloc, Russia entered the last decade of the twentieth century significantly weakened, struggling with internal turmoil and a general lack of confidence. In the immediate post-Cold War world era, dominated by the United States, Russia had little capacity and will to influence international developments settled to establish cordial relations with the Western world under the frail leadership of Boris Yeltsin. Hence, in a world torn apart by ethnic clashes, Russia was indifferent not only to the US assuming the role of a global police force but also towards the Western endeavour to legitimise military intervention for humanitarian purposes. The Russian attitude started to shift with the bombing of Yugoslavia by NATO forces in 1999 in reaction to the Kosovo crisis (Allison,

2013, p. 68). The military intervention had bypassed the Security Council, as it would have been vetoed by Russia. The Russians concluded from the Kosovo case that it shattered Russia's traditional strategic influence in the Balkans as it appeared that it was not able to protect its allies from unilateral Western interventions.

Russian scepticism towards humanitarian interventions of the West became more evident with Vladimir Putin's rise to power in 2000 who had a vision to restore Russia's great power status by pursuing a more aggressive foreign policy. The Russian Foreign Policy Concept of 2000 stressed that 'humanitarian intervention' and 'limited sovereignty' are unacceptable because they justify unilateral military action (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2000). Putin, in his first presidential speech in the State Duma in 2000, referred to military operations by the Western powers as being 'under the pretext of humanitarian intervention,' while, in fact, violating the sovereign rights of states reminiscent of the Cold War (Averre & Davies, 2015, pp. 817–818). Indeed, Russia under Putin was much more inclined to view Western-led humanitarian interventions as a calculated infringement of state sovereignty in the post-Cold War global turbulence.

The US-led invasion of Iraq, again with no Security Council approval yet partly justified by some arguments borrowed from the idea of humanitarian intervention, further demonstrated the relationship between humanitarianism and power politics as well as the former's likelihood to be abused by powerful Western states (Allison, 2013). To counter Western unilateralism Russia came to emphasis on multilateralism and consensus within the UN Security Council. Yevgeniy Primakov, the former Prime Minister of Russia, summed up the Russian position with a simple formula: 'rather the United Nations than US unilateralism,' referring to Security Council where Russia commands a veto power (Primakov, 2004).

Within this formula, the objection of Russia towards R2P was overcome during the 2005 World Summit with two revisions in the original report. First, the use of coercive means was made conditional on a UN Security Council decision enabling Russia to exercise a veto power and deprive Western unilateralism of legality, if and when necessary. Second, the human rights violations requiring action were narrowed down to four mass atrocity crimes. As a result, Russia endorsed the doctrine of R2P at the 2005 World Summit which was followed by its approval of R2P in the UNSC Resolutions 1674 and 1894. Russia's confidence in its ability to prevent the interventionist tendencies of Western powers through the vetoing mechanism in the Security Council was the key that led to the initial Russian consent. However, it seemed that while Russia held the key to let the Pillar III mechanism to be practiced the likely evolution of R2P into an international norm with legal and moral strength has surpassed the Russian power. Even short of coercive means the increasing usage of R2P as an effective moral and political language has built an international legitimacy for the doctrine, a development that has resurrected Russia's concerns about national sovereignty and the non-intervention principle in a world in which Russia is believed to be surrounded by its enemies determined to weaken it.



## *Countering and Contesting the West*

The Russian approach towards R2P is, at best, that of reservation and hesitation. Since it is generally regarded as a doctrine created by the Western powers who are likely to abuse it at the expense of Russia an immediate threat is perceived and a cautious ideational and strategical position is taken. The idea of countering the West adds an immediate security dimension to the conception of R2P bringing in strategic culture into the play.

Russia is also troubled by a universalist interpretation of R2P by Western powers that are more inclined towards intervention, bypassing the Security Council (hence, a Russian veto), focused on morality over the legality and more sensitive to humanitarian issues. Holding a conservative-realist view of the world, highlighting the supremacy of state sovereignty, underlying the need for stability instead of morally justified interventions except in the post-Soviet territories the Russian position is thus shaped by caution and distrust towards the west.

Russia principally agrees with the notion that sovereign states have a responsibility to protect their people from atrocity crimes as well as the need to protect vulnerable populations (Ziegler, 2016a, p. 82). But when it comes to the coercive element of R2P, that is collective international action to stop mass atrocities taken place in a foreign country, Russia turns reluctant raising questions of who is to intervene, when is to intervene and how is to intervene as well as the motives and objectives of the intervention. All of these are legitimate concerns, yet reflect uneasiness of the Russians. Sergey Lavrov goes as far as asking the following question: ‘Who will determine whether or not mass violations are taking place?’ (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2017). It seems that first and foremost Russia is pre-occupied with the question of countering Western interventionism. Born out of the distrust towards the Western world and its own vulnerability at home Russia rallies for a more cautious interpretation of R2P, and also wants to keep subjecting the third pillar of R2P to its veto power.

## *Defending Sovereignty, Resisting Norm Creation*

Russia advocates a world order based on respect for the sovereign equality of states and the principle of non-intervention. Hence, it categorically rejects the idea of ‘limited sovereignty’ and suggests that international peace and stability can best be preserved through the guidance of international law which emphasises sovereignty as a central principle (Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, 2012). Russia, pointing to the possibility that in an international order with ‘limited sovereignty’ the choice to employ military force will rest upon a small number of Western states (Ziegler, 2016a, p. 83) has, thus, been concerned that R2P is likely to be interpreted by Western powers as a licence to intervene in domestic affairs of weak states.

Presentation of R2P as an emerging norm also disturbs Russia who prefers to use the word ‘concept’ or ‘notion’ while referring to R2P (Baranovsky & Mateiko,

2016, p. 50). In this line, opposing to Security Council's attempt to refer R2P as an emerging norm Russian representatives to UN warns against 'taking rash and hasty steps to apply that idea arbitrarily and (...) interpreting it too broadly' (General Assembly Debate on Implementing the Responsibility to Protect, 2009). This suggests that Russia is not in favour of putting R2P to a high status such as a new norm of international law reflecting Russia's conservative and statist stance on emerging international norms (Averre & Davies, 2015, pp. 82–83). The manifestation of Russian conservatism in the face of a norm that is perceived, constructed and championed by the West can be understood against the background of its strategic culture that views the West with wariness and distrust.

However, Russia does not want to appear objecting to the idea of saving vulnerable populations from mass atrocities, but it questions the need for crafting R2P as an international norm to respond to mass atrocities. According to Moscow, the appropriate legal and instrumental means to prevent mass violations of human rights already exist, at least in theory. Interpreting a humanitarian catastrophe as a threat to international peace and security, and, thus, authorizing the use of force by the Security Council is possible as it was practiced before, such as UNSCR 688 and 794. This ad hoc form of humanitarian responses to selected cases is a safe and preferred way of addressing humanitarian crises for Russia since it enables Russia to exert its influence on world politics and protects its allies with its veto power in the Security Council. Additionally, the Russians argue that the Geneva Convention on Genocide has already specified the responsibility of sovereign states to prevent such crimes. Thus, reflecting its conservatism in international norm building the Russian stand is that with the UNSC and the Genocide convention at hand there is no need for a new *norm* or *legal mechanism* which can be used selectively and/or misused unilaterally by Western powers that will generate an increasing legitimisation of humanitarian intervention through a general consensus on the coercive means of R2P (Baranovsky & Mateiko, 2016, p. 52). Russians have grown apprehensive with the prospect of R2P transforming into a norm because, as Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov claimed, 'R2P was just another name for humanitarian intervention,' a term that fell out of favour (quoted in Baranovsky & Mateiko, 2016, p. 51).

Built on its strategic culture of insecurity and suspect of the West, Russia suggests that intervention based on humanitarian justifications would undermine global stability, and enable the West to intervene freely in the world at the expense of Russia (Ziegler, 2016a). Thus, Russia opts for the safety of national sovereignty and great-power politics, and feels comfortable without creating new norms that demand a global moral and political responsibility beyond national boundaries that may play at the hands of the universalist and unilateralist Western powers.

### *'Sadder but Wiser:' Learning from Libya and Syria*

The Libya intervention of 2011, sanctioned by a UN Security Council resolution from which Russia abstained, is considered to be the first 'successful' implementation of the Pillar III of the doctrine of R2P. Yet the Libya case provided

the Russians with a catalyst to review their position on R2P in relation to their strategic culture. The implicit support Russia gave initially to the Western powers willing to intervene in Libya by invoking the R2P appeared confusing since, when the Libyan civil war erupted in February 2011 as part of the Arab Spring, it was expected that Russia would have opposed a humanitarian intervention and vetoed a possible Security Council resolution. However, Russia condemned the Gaddafi regime and voted in favour of Resolution 1970, which called for an arms embargo towards a regime accused of crimes against humanity. Later on, Russia did not block Resolution 1973 that authorised 'all necessary measures' to protect civilians.

The reluctance of, then president, Medvedev to confront the US when the bilateral relations were in a period of 'reset' (Financial Times, 2011), Gaddafi's apparent threats for mass atrocities to the opposition groups (ABC News, 2011), and the lack of immediate Russian geopolitical interests at stake in Libya are usually mentioned as explanations for this early cooperation of Moscow with the Western powers. However, the Western–Russian rapprochement on R2P was quite short-lived as Moscow, soon after the beginning of the operation, started to accuse the Western coalition of going far beyond the mandate of Resolution 1973, which was the protection of civilians, through arming the rebels and implementing a regime change. While Western states labelled the Libyan case as a 'model' for implementing R2P, the Russian position was that Resolution 1973 was a 'scrap of paper to cover up a pointless military operation' (The Embassy of the Russian Federation to the UK, 2011). In this context, Putin described the Russian disappointment with the overreach in Libya as a 'learning experience', a further demonstration that the West cannot be trusted when it comes to the use of force in the name of R2P (Ziegler, 2016b, p. 350).

Russia was not only critical of the intent of interveners in Libya but also the outcome. Since any R2P action is expected to meet the criteria of a reasonable prospect for success Russian officials claimed that the NATO intervention failed in this respect too. In the absence of government control in the immediate aftermath of the intervention, the Russians constantly pointed out the chaos in Libya in terms of widespread torture, indiscriminate killings and gross human rights violations. Instability and turmoil fostered by foreign interventions were described by Sergey Lavrov:

What we are seeing now only goes to show that regime change, especially through the use of force from outside, never leads to any good anywhere. Libya has turned into a territory without a central government, a country fragmented into districts controlled by different armed groups.' (quoted in Piskunova, 2018, p. 4)

In sum, Libya served as a test case for the Russians to come to a conclusion about R2P's likely usage by Western powers for their strategic gains disturbing regional peace and stability. This 'learning experience' of Russia in Libya soon had implications on another crisis in the Middle East. After the fall of the Gaddafi regime in Libya, the Arab Spring spilled over Syria where it quickly turned into a bloody civil war with sectarian features. Western states with the lead of the US appeared interested in a regime change stimulated, if necessary, by intervention

justified on humanitarian grounds. The Russians, 'sadder but wiser' as described by Putin after the Libya debacle, did not give in to the demands of Western powers (Putin, 2012). Thus, emphasising the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Syria, Russia repeatedly vetoed the Western-sponsored resolutions invoking Chapter VII of the UN charter and calling for sanctions on Syria. Arguing that externally induced regime changes result in chaos and civil wars Russia often justified its position on Syria by referring to the Libyan experience while also stating that intervention to Syria would merely strengthen the Islamic terrorist finding ground in Syria and further destabilising the region. Moreover, pointing out the humanitarian catastrophe Saudi Arabia, a strategic ally of the West, created in Yemen, Russia accused the Western world of being highly selective in employing the doctrine of R2P, reserving it for the regimes that are hostile towards them (Ziegler, 2016b, p. 350). The Syria case demonstrates that Russia has integrated its approach to R2P into a broader context of security thinking with significant input from its strategic culture.

## **Russian Exceptionalism**

Though Russia defends the idea of sovereign states' control over internal affairs, the non-interference principle and territorial integrity of states, none of these principles were observed in any of the Russian military interventions in its environs. Instead, Dmitriy Medvedev, then the president of Russia, stated after the Georgian war that sovereignty does not mean a state has the right to do whatever it pleases (Ziegler, 2016b, p. 350), and President Putin after the annexation of Crimea called for the right to self-determination of the Crimean people to be respected (Borgen, 2015, pp. 236–237).

Russia has repeatedly accused Western powers of taking advantage of humanitarian crises to further their interests and applying double standards in invoking R2P. However, when Russia perceives its geopolitical interests at stake, it does not hesitate using political arguments similar to that of R2P to justify its military interventions. Russia viewed the Kosovo case as an unacceptable violation of international law that must not be repeated. Yet, the language used by the Russian politicians to justify their intervention in Georgia in 2008 (Allison, 2013, pp. 156 and 212), the Crimean annexation in 2014 and the ongoing Donbass war in Eastern Ukraine Crimea were very similar to the arguments put forward by the Western coalition to excuse the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia (Kuhrt, 2015, p. 104).

It was Medvedev who drew parallels between Kosovo and South Ossetia arguing that if the former was a *sui generis* case so was the latter (Ziegler, 2016a, p. 82). He accused Georgia of committing genocide towards the Ossetians, and Lavrov, the foreign minister, more recently accused Ukraine of conspiring to ethnic cleansing by exterminating Russians and Jews (Haaretz, 2018). While the Kremlin frequently uses, when it deems necessary, a discourse very similar to the language of R2P, it refrains from directly mentioning the concept in the Security Council or in any official document (Baranovsky & Mateiko, 2016, p. 63). When

describing the Russian military operations abroad the term ‘humanitarian intervention’ or ‘R2P’ is not used either by the government or by the (government-controlled) media (Piskunova, 2018). Instead, Russia defends its position by referring to article 51 of the UN Charter, the right to self-defence (Evans, 2009). Russia also is careful to reserve this discourse only for fellow Russian compatriots living in the post-Soviet vicinities, where the Kremlin claims a legitimate sphere of interest and influence (Ziegler, 2016b, p. 357).

Russian officials always warned Western powers against rash and incautious military actions while underlining military options must be considered only as a last resort. Yet, Russia showed no sign of caution or seeking a political solution to the dispute before the intervention in its region, and whether or not Russia used military force as a last resort is highly debatable. Similarly, Russia frequently stated that before implementing R2P’s third pillar, the failure of the government to protect its population must be manifestly demonstrated. Besides, it has always been the Russian stand that the use of force within R2P should acquire approval from the UNSC. By avoiding a direct R2P terminology in the cases mentioned above, Russia conducted military operations unilaterally without a UNSC approval, and did not bother to investigate whether the governments of Georgia and Ukraine committed mass atrocities when it carried out direct and indirect military interventions justified, at least partly, on humanitarian grounds. The Russian strategic culture of prioritising security in its near abroad where establishing zone of influence is viewed legitimate seems to have prevailed over a principle stand on R2P.

## Conclusion

According to the World Summit Outcome Document, responding to massive humanitarian crises through R2P includes, among other measures, a military component under a UN Security Council mandate. When it comes to the use of force, approving or disapproving it or taking part in it, states step into the realm of security even if the motive and objective may be humanitarian. In the realm of security thinking, states are influenced by their strategic culture that forms a loose code of conduct for policymakers, and a context within which security decisions are made. Russia is not an exception. The Russian strategic culture by constraining decision-makers, defining appropriate behaviour and reflecting insecurities and aspirations has affected its contestation about R2P.

As such, the Russian position on R2P is shaped by caution and distrust. Despite its uneasiness with the idea and practices of humanitarianism, Russia agreed with a notion of humanitarian responsibility to protect vulnerable populations from mass atrocity crimes. Yet, with the emergence of the doctrine of R2P, Russia stressed the differences between the principles of R2P which they agreed upon and the interventionist interpretation of R2P by the West which they strongly disagreed. Though the use of force under the doctrine of R2P requires Security Council authorisation Russia with a veto power in the council is still concerned that gaining an international legal and moral strength R2P may be used for

interventionist policies by Western powers. Such a distrust of the West that arises from its strategic culture leads Russia positioning itself in the 'sceptics group.' In a similar line, with a conservative reading of the UN Charter, Russia, in defence of the preservation of the established international order, denies R2P the status of an emerging norm concerned that adaption of R2P as a norm would result in weakening state sovereignty, undermining international law and enhancing the dominant position of the West with significant damages on Russian security stature in the globe. The resulting Russian approach towards R2P, which is generally regarded as an idea created by the West and for the Western interests, is that of reservation and hesitation.

Such a Russian approach to R2P is linked to its strategic culture which views the external world, and especially the West and its norm-building efforts, threatening. From a Russian strategic culture perspective, R2P with its coercive element falls into the domain of security in which moral and humanitarian concerns do not play a decisive role. Instead, threat perception, sense of insecurity and vulnerabilities of Russia construe parameters for appropriate behaviour that is geared to attain security, overcome threats, and eliminate the source of insecurity. In this, the West is defined as the primary source of the threat, and Western norm building efforts, like R2P, are viewed with suspicion.

However, while Russia has been denouncing the interventionist inclinations of the Western world based on humanitarian concerns, it does not hesitate to use military means justified by similar discourse when it is deemed furthering Russian national interests as was the case in the secession of South Ossetia and Crimea, and the war in Eastern Ukraine. Yet, Russia is careful not to use R2P as a formal justification for its military operations in its near abroad. Instead of invoking a universalist language of R2P, the Russian usage is specific only to be applied for the Russian compatriots in post-Soviet territories as in line with Russian foreign policy doctrine and its strategic culture that places an inherent claim on its near abroad.

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