

This is a repository copy of *Book Review: The Responsibility To Protect: A Defense*, written by Alex J. Bellamy.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:  
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/146003/>

Version: Accepted Version

---

**Article:**

Gilgan, Chloë [orcid.org/0000-0002-9972-8725](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9972-8725) (2015) Book Review: The Responsibility To Protect: A Defense, written by Alex J. Bellamy. *Global Responsibility to Protect*, 7 (1). pp. 112-114. ISSN 1875-9858

<https://doi.org/10.1163/1875984X-00701007>

---

**Reuse**

Items deposited in White Rose Research Online are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved unless indicated otherwise. They may be downloaded and/or printed for private study, or other acts as permitted by national copyright laws. The publisher or other rights holders may allow further reproduction and re-use of the full text version. This is indicated by the licence information on the White Rose Research Online record for the item.

**Takedown**

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing [eprints@whiterose.ac.uk](mailto:eprints@whiterose.ac.uk) including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

## Book Review

Alex J. Bellamy, *The Responsibility To Protect: A Defense* (Oxford, 2015).

As the humanitarian crisis in Syria continues, the debates surrounding the utility of the 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P) proliferate. If R2P is a defendant on trial, it wants Alex J. Bellamy as its defence attorney. One of the most provocative aspects of Bellamy's book is his idealism surrounding R2P's implementation problems. Despite the reality that R2P intervention is dependent on political and prudential considerations among the United Nations Security Council's (UNSC) Permanent Five (P5), Bellamy explains that this is the sacrifice for widespread consensus on R2P. In other words, where there is a failure to implement the R2P principle due to the myriad political interests and constraints of the P5, the principle still enjoys 'buy-in' by a large number of states. This existing commitment to the R2P principle among states, in contrast to the lack of implementation of R2P on the ground (due to political gridlock within the UNSC), exposes the principle's fundamental weakness as a norm. This dichotomy is both necessary and troubling. Strong consensus on R2P is necessary for the principle to continue existing, but the resulting weakness of the norm requires further elaboration.

First, Bellamy's defence claims we must clarify what R2P is before we judge its success and failure. He says it is a principle made up of at least two norms, one recognisable in the legal world (states' responsibilities towards their own populations) and one newer principle that can be described as political (international responsibilities that transcend sovereignty). This may be true, but it is hard to remain positive about R2P's *widespread consensus* here. While all states may embrace the

legal aspect of R2P concerning the inviolability of sovereignty, it cannot be said that there is such extensive consensus on the newer political notion of intervening despite sovereignty. Bellamy's reliance on R2P's widespread consensus is overstated because it does not lead to consensual action on the ground. Most likely, states bought into the R2P principle because it was safe to do so: The principle is not legally binding; it has a lot of wriggle room for states to decide what to do on a case-by-case basis; and no country would condemn a principle that is concerned with innocent people facing mass atrocity when they are not promising any specific action on their own part. The debatable global acceptance of R2P does not signify its implementation on the ground.

Second, in judging R2P's true success, Bellamy claims it is an authentic and robust 'identity changer' as states have 'internalised the values of less tolerance for mass atrocities and the notion that such acts are worthy of international concern'. R2P failures (due to political indifference or lack of consensus), followed by international condemnation, serve as Bellamy's proof of this identity change. His example of such 'universal criticism' of inaction is the General Assembly's decision to 'censure the Security Council over its failure to protect civilians in Syria'. Indeed, this deserves positivity on both sides of the R2P debate. However, such international condemnation has not translated into action on the ground in the name of R2P.

Bellamy admits that we are unfortunately left with cases like Sri Lanka, Darfur, and Syria, the implementation nightmares of R2P. In a classic lawyerly move to defend his client, Bellamy uses the analogy of criminal offenders that evade detection and/or punishment under domestic law with the caveat that we would not repeal criminal laws just because a few guilty go free.

Even though Bellamy puts forward a good case for R2P, the real worry is the persistence of these ‘troublesome cases’. The cliché of ‘never again’ may have taken on a new meaning after Libya. While the book spends ample time discussing the controversial intervention in Libya, there is lack of emphasis on the role the Libya intervention has played subsequently in Syria and elsewhere. ‘Never again’ appears to now mean no future UNSC agreement on R2P action especially in Syria. While Russia and China were ‘deeply concerned’ regarding the humanitarian crisis in Libya, the military intervention and ensuing regime change have now prevented any consensus among the P5 in relation to the current humanitarian crisis in Syria. While Russia’s veto against intervention in Syria may be self-interested, China offers another perspective. China continues to veto action in Syria but has no political or economic interest in the Assad regime and has been propagating ‘Responsible Protection’ as a cure to its increasing distrust of R2P. According to an article by Stuart Gottlieb, Russia’s former president Dmitry Medvedev vetoed UNSC resolutions concerning Syria to avoid another Libya-type intervention.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, a P5 agreement on restraint in the use of the veto is unlikely given opposition by many of the P5. Given such political friction and cynicism, it is likely that more Syria- type cases will persist as a result of the Libya intervention, so Bellamy’s shortlist of troubling cases may become the norm and not the exception.

Bellamy’s consistent theme of R2P’s enjoyment of world consensus as a security against R2P becoming obsolete is overstated. Such consensus, while necessary and positive, still does not translate into action on the ground especially post-Libya. Thus,

---

<sup>1</sup> Stuart Gottlieb, ‘Syria and the Demise of the Responsibility to Protect’, *The National Interest*, 5 November 2013, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/syria-the-demise-the-responsibility-protect-9360>, accessed 1 December 2014.

widespread consensus cannot cure the implementation problems of R2P. Even so, Bellamy is right that R2P is the only current anti-mass atrocity principle, and if one applies the ‘veil of ignorance’ he borrows from philosopher John Rawls, I too, would rather live in a world where there is a possibility of collective action to protect people from mass atrocities.

Chloë M. Gilgan  
*University of York*

TOTAL WORD COUNT (including titles and footnotes): 949