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OPINION

Canada can lead on the world stage again – and in the name of protecting civilians

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Twenty years ago, Canada gave the world a new principle. The Responsibility to Protect (R2P), crafted through a Canadian-led international commission and endorsed unanimously at the United Nations in 2005, reframed sovereignty not simply as a bundle of rights and privileges conferred upon a state, but as a responsibility.

The most fundamental state responsibility is to protect its own citizens from mass atrocity. Member states solemnly undertook that failure by a state to provide that protection would result in a collective response that could, in rare cases, include armed intervention authorized by the Security Council. R2P's promise was clear: When civilians faced genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing or crimes against humanity, the world would not look away.

For a time, the principle carried weight. R2P helped shape responses to threatened atrocities in Kenya and Côte d'Ivoire, and it gave new authority to the idea that “never again” meant something real.

But after the contested intervention in Libya in 2011, consensus fractured. Since then, atrocity crimes have continued in multiple regions – consider, for example, Syria, Myanmar, and now Sudan. As the genocide unfolding in Gaza demonstrates, targeting civilians has become the military trend line of the 21st century.

This is the tragedy of R2P at 20 years old: a noble principle has been eroded by selective application and lack of leadership. When action suited the interests of the great powers, as in Libya, intervention was possible – though that intervention was tainted by overreach. When interests diverged, as in Syria, or when the violence took place in a state with little strategic significance, as the big powers have apparently deemed Sudan, the principle was quietly set aside. And Canada itself seems to have lost interest in its own achievement; the Harper government, rejecting the human security

framework in our Liberal government's foreign policy, shelved R2P and withdrew from active engagement on protection of civilians. The Trudeau government, while declaring in 2015 that Canada was back, chose not to engage in international activism.

Most of all, R2P fell victim to disharmony among the five permanent members of the Security Council (P5), each of which hold the power of veto – a power that Russia and China have exercised repeatedly to block collective responses to genocide and other mass atrocities.

But R2P does not have to die because of the Security Council's paralysis or the past neglect of its former champions. It can be renewed through a coalition of middle powers: states with credibility in humanitarian diplomacy, experience in peacekeeping and mediation, and no great-power baggage.

Canada should lead this effort. Alongside partners such as Norway, Switzerland, Ireland, Chile, Jordan, Mexico and South Africa – many of them members of the old Human Security Network – Canada could help give R2P a second life. The emphasis should be less on military intervention and more on prevention, humanitarian access and accountability.

Such a coalition could start by sponsoring a resolution in the General Assembly asking the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to render an advisory opinion on the legality of P5 vetoes in cases of threatened or continuing mass atrocity. As she wrote in her brilliant book on the subject, New York University Professor Jennifer Trahan argues that such vetoes are indeed unlawful since they contravene the UN's Charter, ignore the very purpose of the Council and violate the Genocide Convention to which each of the P5 is a party.

But the suggested coalition could do much more. It could push for humanitarian corridors and safe access in war zones, strengthen support for the International Criminal Court and independent evidence-gathering bodies, fund regional early-warning systems to flag atrocity risks, and monitor the exercise of P5 vetoes to ensure respect for any ICJ ruling.

Canada could host an Ottawa+20 Conference on Civilian Protection, bringing together like-minded states, regional organizations, and civil society to issue a renewed declaration on civilian protection, adapted to today's realities.

The 20th anniversary of R2P should not be an occasion for polite remembrance. It is a reminder of what is at stake when the world loses standards. The plight of civilians in armed conflict is the defining moral challenge of our time. Canada once led the way in placing civilian protection at the heart of international security, and in a fractured world, we can – and should – do so again.

As Mark Carney's government conducts its in-house foreign policy review and seeks new pathways to re-establishing Canada as a serious player, it might benefit from reviving R2P. We cannot afford to be mere bystanders.