

# THE SELECTIVE RUSSIAN BEHAVIOR IN LIBYA AND SYRIA



*Los conflictos desatados en los últimos años han despertado una fuerte crítica contra el sistema de seguridad colectiva de Naciones Unidas. Es por ello que se han elaborado nuevas “normas” o “principios” para reforzar dicho sistema. Tal es el caso de la Doctrina de la Responsabilidad para Proteger (R2PD, por sus siglas en inglés), bajo la cual se llevó adelante la intervención en Libia. Sin embargo, este mismo principio no pudo aplicarse frente a los graves sucesos -que continúan hoy en día- en Siria. Un actor clave que explica en cierta medida el fracaso de la comunidad internacional en este último país es Rusia. Analizar el rol de dicho Estado y su conducta frente a la aplicabilidad de estos mecanismos en los dos casos mencionados es el objetivo del presente trabajo. Todo ello, enmarcado en el liderazgo de Vladimir Putin, quien desde hace años vienen utilizando una retórica anti-occidente que nos remite al periodo de la Guerra Fría.*

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Since the United Nations (UN) security system has been said to be old-fashioned and unsuccessful to deal with new issues like terrorism, massive human rights violations, failed states crisis among others, new “norms” and contributions to the system have been developed and promoted during the last decades, mainly by the Western powers. For instance, the Responsibility to Protect Doctrine (R2PD) and the Duty to Prevent Principle (DPP) are clever examples of that process. According to some Western analysts and academics like Lee Feinstein

and Anne-Marie Slaughter (2004) the R2PD and the DPP have been developed to mitigate the weaknesses within the UN’ system.

In 2005, the global community endorsed the R2PD during the World Summit – at a plenary meeting of the UN General Assembly. This was a Canadian-sponsored initiative that claims that sovereignty is not a right, but entails responsibilities for States that provide protection and security for their populations. It focuses on some specific issues like preventing crimes of genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing.

On the other hand, the DPP (Feinstein & Slaughter, 2004) is set as a collective duty to

prevent threats against international security and is assumed as a complementary principle of the R2PD. Even today, this principle is considered a corollary of the R2PD.

These principles have been revived since they were invoked in the intervention of Libya in 2011 and reflected in declarations like the G8’s Deauville Declaration (2011).<sup>1</sup> On the contrary, the situation of Syria, the massive violations of rights and the deaths consequence of the fight between the government and the opposition’s forces, did not find any precise initiative from the international community represented in the UN under the R2PD umbrella.

Given this situation, the first question that

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1- In May 2011, the Declaration stated: “Qadhafi and the Libyan government have failed to fulfil their responsibility to protect the Libyan population and have lost all legitimacy. He has no future in a free, democratic Libya. He must go”. P.18.

arrives as a consequence of that is why these principles were suitable to support and to pursue the intervention in Libya but did not apply in the case of Syria. Since in the case of Libya humanitarian reasons were stated, why those reason did not apply to the other case. And finally, what was the role of Russia and its position regarding to these two cases with apparently similar connotations. The latter question is essential because Russia remains the main National actor opposing western initiatives and actions within the international system and it is sensitive to the West involvement, especially in Syria.

Russian behavior in both cases is a key element to understand the role of the R2PD within the current international scenario. It seems that the competing views on the R2PD application remains manifesting the dynamics of power between Western powers and Russia. Despite the fact that United States (US) involvement in Libya was not as deep as in former decades and previous similar crisis, the struggle to balance power within the world between Russia and their counterparts resemble the logic of the Cold War.

The aim of this article is to analyze and explore the possible explanations for the selective Russian behavior. We will base our analysis in several specialized articles, official statements (especially in the case of Russia) and the Russian position within the UN regarding to the R2PD development and application in Libya and Syria.

In spite of the several researches and papers on this matter<sup>2</sup>, most of them focus on the Western powers' behaviors (mainly in the case of Libya) without offering a deep analysis of the Russian position a its possible determinants.

As we know, sometimes States' behavior can not be explained in a rational way. At the



beginning of this research I was committed to analyze Russian behavior in terms of Realism. However, two difficulties arrived. First of all, the differentiated answer to these two similar scenarios<sup>3</sup>; strategic issues and national interest seemed to not have enough explanatory power. Secondly, the Russian intervention in Crimea exposed a different approach toward the R2PD. In the end, Russia applied the same double standard that has always criticized in Western powers.

As a consequence of that, our case of study required to be thought in terms of a different theoretical framework. On this matter, Tatiana Romanova work (2012) offers an interesting analysis about Russian foreign policy in terms of Neoclassical Realism, which seemed to be more suitable for the main purpose of this paper.

Romanova's work is based on Gideon Rose (1998) ideas, which highlight that *"the behavior of national governments on the international stage is not a mere reaction caused by external events, but we also need to take into account internal circumstances and the interests of national players"* (Romanova, 2012, p.1).

In that sense, we assume that Russian behavior can be explained mainly because of two elements: Russian policy seems to be a reaction to external events, for instance the consequences of the intervention in Libya, not only in the final outcome but also in its impact over Russian

interests. Moreover, there is a component of leadership and internal dynamic of competing visions of the world, with differing interest in national players.

#### **The Arab revolts as a challenge and burden of proof to the R2PD**

It is often said that the Charter of UN states high ideals, seeking to promote Human Rights, humanitarian assistance, the need to avoid inter States conflict and the use of force as the last resort. However, despite the fact that the UN intended to unite "peace-loving states" to protect international peace and security, during the Cold War did not succeed to do it. Moreover, this perception seems to be kept. UN security system has

not created the feeling of a more secure world. As a consequence of that, initiatives like the R2PD are seen as threats and Western tools to seek goals of hegemony. Russia is a clear example of the mistrust regarding to this doctrine.

The beginning of the Arab Revolts in 2010 constituted one of the main challenges to the effectiveness of one of the latest tools of the UN security system. The

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2- Just to mention some of them: BERMAN, David; MICHAELSEN, Christopher. "Intervention in Libya: Another Nail in the Coffin for the Responsibility-to-Protect?" *International Community Law Review* 14 (2012) 337-358; BERUBE, Michael. "Libya for Libyans." *Foreign Policy in Focus*, January 12th, 2012; BERUBE, Michael, and GIBBS, David. "Strategic Dialogue: Libya after Gaddafi". *Foreign Policy in Focus*, January 17th, 2012; GIBBS, David. "Libya and the New Warmongering". *Foreign Policy in Focus*, January 12th, 2012; HILSUM, Lindsey. Sandstorm. The penguin press. 2012; PRASHAD, Vijay. Arab Spring, Libyan Winter. AK Press. 2012; WEISS, Thomas. "RtoP Alive and Well after Libya", 25(3) *Ethics & International Affairs* (2011) pp. 287-292.

3- As Romanova says: neoclassical realism poses the question why states with similar parameters and acting under the same external conditions display different conduct in the international arena.

negative outcomes of its application in Libya confirmed Russian perceptions about Western intentions beyond humanitarian reasons.<sup>4</sup> And as a consequence of the failed intentions of repeating this model in Syria, some analyst said that while the R2PD was revived in Libya, just a couple of months later was buried in Syria.

In March 2011 France started military operations in Libya for humanitarian reasons and with the United Nations Security Council's (UNSC) authorization under Resolution 1973 with the abstention of Russia and China. It was expected from this intervention to mitigate the consequences of the internal crisis without creating more problems. In general, this is the aim of the UNSC (United Nations Security Council): to solve conflicts, meanly when peaceful measures have failed to do it so.

However, in the case of Libya what started as the creation of a "non-fly zone" in order to help protect civilians" (UNSC, 2011b, p.3) derived in a ground intervention being followed by the closure of the peaceful channels of negotiation.<sup>5</sup> UNSC Resolution 1973 was central part of the process of justification of the war against Gaddafi. It had the "virtue" of being enough broad to allow almost everything to remove Gaddafi from power.

As a consequence of that, by June 2011 the conflict had not ended and the problems had visibly increased. Some critics stated that NATO had exceeded not only the spirit of the Resolution (which in turn was enough broad to set unclear limits) but also the R2PD's one. Not only the peaceful means were completely ignored during the process, but NATO assisted rebel forces.<sup>6</sup>

By the same period of time of the intervention in Libya, and as a consequence of the domino effect of the Arab Revolts, Syrian uprising started and after unfruitful attempts to negotiate, two months later the Army tanks enter Deera, Banyas, Hons and suburbs of Damascus to stop anti regime protests. Since then the situation deteriorated and Western countries worked on a similar Reso-

lution for Syria, but China and Russia blocked their attempts. The most they got was a non binding peace plan in March 2012 drafted by UN envoy Kofi Annan (UNSC, 2012). Since the beginning of the uprising in Syria until now, it is said that at least 140.000 have been killed. But no R2PD has been invoked or UNSC resolution has been approved. The

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arguments stated in Libya did not find equal measures or agreement in the case of Syria.

Russian abstention in Resolution 1973 was key element. The veto in the case of Syria as well. What has changed from one case to the other? What could be the reasons for the change in Russian behavior? In terms of Neoclassical Realism the question that arrives once again is "*why States with similar parameters and acting under the same external conditions display different conduct in the international arena*" (Romanova; 2012; p.1).

### Russia and the R2PD

Since the elaboration of the 2005 World Summit outcome document, Russian position on the R2PD in intra States conflicts has been clear: it must not be use to change regi-

mes by providing support to one of the opposing sides. This idea is the same than the one on the spirit of the document. However, Russia has also warned that if such actions are applied they will end up fostering violence and precipitating civil wars. At first sight, and looking at the post intervention scenario in Libya, Russian fears seem to have become true.

It is well known that even when Dimitri Medvedev was in power (May 2008-May 2012), when Putin caught a cold, Dimitri sneezed. And for sure one of the main (if not the most important) reasons for Resolution 1973 approval is that Medvedev was in power instead of Putin. And he might not be pleased with Medvedev clumsy handling of the situation in Libya.

In material and economic terms, we could say that Syria has been always strategic for Russia. First of all, in Tartun Syria hosts the only remaining Russian naval base on Mediterranean. Secondly, the investments of Russian companies in the Syrian energy sector are a thousand millions business, and Damascus is one of the main clients of the defense industry of the Russian Federation.

In security terms, we have to take into account the security implications for the Russian Federation itself. As Syria sponsored anti-Western terrorism during the Cold War, and today maintains strong links with organizations that attack Israel (as Hezbollah in Lebanon or Hamas in Palestine), terrorism hitting Russia in the North Caucasus has received support from radicalism originated in Sunni countries; the emergence of an Islamist government relatively close to the Caucasus is a potential threat for Russia.

But the truth is that before the intervention in Libya, Russia have barely used Tartun base and the trade relation with Syria have remained far from being significant in Russian national accounts.

However, any potential intervention to pursue a change regime within Syria is for Russia, but especially in Putin's view, a sensitive issue to Russian interests. Since the end of

4- The Deauville Declaration itself expressed a will of pursue a regime change, beyond the spirit of the R2PD.

5- BRICS came up with a peaceful solution for the Libyan conflict backing African Union's initiatives and leader by Jacob Zuma and the G7 did not pay attention to that option.

6- The R2PD states that it applies in cases of genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity (UNGA, 2005, p.31) and should be authorized "on a case-by-case basis" when peaceful means are inadequate or national authorities manifestly failed to protect their populations.



the Cold War Russia (especially during Putin's administrations) has kept its opposition to Western intended rule in the world, especially in sensitive areas of interests, for instance Syria or Iran. This has very much to do with Putin's security paranoia and his antipathy to Western moralizing.

His influence within the State and even over Dimitri Medvedev is widely known (or at least suspected) as well as his mistrust in Western powers<sup>7</sup>, which increased after the intervention in Libya and their efforts to apply the R2PD in Syria as well. His perception of the world seems to resemble the Cold War logic in the confrontation between Russia and the West. According to some analysts the Russian veto has been a clear revenge for what happened in 2011 in Libya and against the R2PD and Putin could have something to do in such change in Medvedev's behavior.<sup>8</sup>

In this sense, the "content" of the Russian State appears as a key explanatory factor. Romanova states that *"the information of certain internal political factors may increase under pressure from the global system"*. And Putin run for election and upper echelons of Russian Politburo on his view may have been essential in the new vetos' policy.

Putin pressure over Medvedev was evidenced in the contradictory statements of both of them when Medvedev was still in power.<sup>9</sup> Putin holds a romantic idea of restoring some of the USSR prestige and such idea seems to be increased by the perception of external threat from Western policies and behaviors. This view (considering his role as

main figure of the executive power in Russia) far from creating internal opposition, has been backed not only by the upper echelons of the Russian State but by the public opinion. According to the Pew Research Center his public support has increased in the last years.



*"Roughly eight-in-ten Russians (83%) say they have confidence in President Putin to do the right thing in world affairs, up from 69% in 2012, the last time this question was asked. Fully 52% say they have a lot of confidence in the Russian leader, compared with 37% two years ago"* (Pew Research Global Attitudes Project, 2014). Regarding to the situation in Crimea, the same research states that: *"Russian President Vladimir Putin's handling of the crisis in Ukraine has met with considerable opposition in Western nations and much of the international community, as well as in Ukraine itself, but Russians have largely rallied around their leader. Putin is overwhelmingly popular, and Russian national pride appears to be on the rise. In fact, a plurality thinks Putin's handling of the crisis has*

*improved Russia's international stature. Meanwhile, tensions with the West have led to a dramatic spike in negative views about the U.S. and the European Union. Similarly, both U.S. President Barack Obama and German Chancellor Angela Merkel are held in low regard"*.

This is an important factor, since as Romanova says, *"a model facing constant challenges from domestic forces not only undermines a country's foreign policy, but also makes it a less convincing power [...] in the world"*. In other words, such support to Putin has allowed him to mobilize (extract) resources and direct them to the attempts of *"increase the control over the environment"* (Gideon, 1998, p.155).

Romanova points out that foreign policy in Russia *"has been always regarded as some kind of "royal cause"*

(2012, p. 4) and in current times that can be interpreted as the Russian foreign policy falling into the President's competence. Far from creating a greater gap between society and State, in Russia this has derived in a greater confidence of people in Vladimir Putin as a leader. Moreover, since Russian upper strata disagreed<sup>10</sup> over the country's position in the UNSC regarding the enforcement of a non-fly zone in Libya, Putin position has been reinforced.

#### To conclude

Selective response of Russia in Libya and Syria (we can also add Crimea) can be analyzed in terms of neoclassical realism. In this sense, internal grievances within Medvedev's policy in Libya have been critical in the

7- In several articles he has supported this belief: *"It is important for the United Nations and its Security Council to effectively counter the dictates of some countries and their arbitrary actions in the world arena. Nobody has the right to usurp the prerogatives and powers of the UN, particularly the use of force with regard to sovereign nations. [...] It seems that NATO members, especially the United States, have developed a peculiar interpretation of security that is different from ours. The Americans have become obsessed with the idea of becoming absolutely invulnerable. This utopian concept is unfeasible both technologically and geopolitically, but it is the root of the problem"*.

8- After the intervention in Libya, Russia vetoed three different drafts regarding to the situation in Syria: on October, 4, 2011 (draft S/2011/612), on July, 9, 2012 (draft S/2012/538) and on February, 4, 2012 (draft S/2012/77). China followed the same steps.

9- For further information you can read: *"Putin and Medvedev spar over Libya"*. <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/europe/03/21/russia.leaders.libya/>

10- For further information on this topic we recommend: MAKARYCHEV, Andrey. *"Russia's "Libya Debate". Political meanings and repercussions"*. PONARS Eurasia Memo No. 178. September 2011.

corroboration and support of Putin perceptions about the West. Far from being rejected, his position has had an increasing support not only from the public opinion but also other institutions within the Russian State.

The negative outcome of the intervention in Libya has also reinforced the mistrust in the international security system mainly represented in UN and some tools like the R2PD. Despite the fact that can be argued that Russian intervention in Crimea and its support to Assad's regime are short of inter-

national legitimacy, Western powers lack of legitimacy to criticize and are cautious about taking unilateral courses of action against Russia. Their governments are suffering from internal opposition since they are still facing the consequences of the last international financial crisis among other issues.

In this context, despite the fact that Russia has also suffered from internal grievances, Putin public image has been consolidated and the romantic idea of a new era for the Russian leadership in the world (mainly expressed in the confrontation with the West)

has gained in some cases followers and in others an acquiescence functional to the Russian double standard and current foreign policy. This "support" has allowed to the Russian machinery of State (with Putin as main actor) "allocate national resources" (Rose, 1998, p.147) to foreign policy which has contributed to shape the foreign policy beyond the systemic pressures and incentives and the relative material power of Russia within the international arena. 🌀

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