

Collective Security at the Crossroads: Analyzing the UN's Security Framework from 2005 to 2025

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Abstract

On the 80th anniversary of the United Nations (UN), this paper revisits Andrea Charron's 2007 discussion of the UN's collective security framework in "Expanding the UN's Collective Security System." Charron analyzed the UN's capacity to uphold international peace and security, reviewing the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and the Duty to Prevent as potential tools for strengthening collective security. This paper situates Charron's work in the geopolitical landscape of 2007 and examines the R2P and Duty to Prevent doctrines against the seven ideal elements of security. It then analyzes the application of R2P in Libya in 2011 to evaluate its impacts and limitations with consideration of the seven ideal elements of security. Charron's assertions and predictions are assessed within the contemporary geopolitical context of 2025. Finally, the paper reflects on the future of collective security and the challenges posed by an eroding international rules-based system.

Keywords: Collective Security; United Nations Security Council; Responsibility to Protect; Duty to Prevent; Humanitarian Intervention; Global Governance; State Sovereignty; Conflict Resolution; Peacekeeping Operations; International Law

Introduction

For the 80th anniversary of the United Nations (UN), it is appropriate to revisit Andrea Charron's 60th anniversary discussion on the UN's collective security framework in "Expanding the UN's Collective Security System." The original article was written in 2005 during a period of hope and promise in the post-Cold War era. Charron confronts the UN's challenge to live up to the ideal of collective security (i.e. to maintain international peace and security) and identifies two proposed doctrines aiming to strengthen the organization, namely the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and the Duty to Prevent.

Charron's critical analysis of these doctrines underscores the importance of considering political realities and the intentional limitations of the existing UN collective security framework when trying to pursue normative ideals. This update challenges Charron's assertions published in 2007 against the current context and analyzes her predictions about the R2P alongside the only application of the doctrine in Libya in 2011. The good intentions

of the R2P and its normative direction fell apart when applied to a real-world context. However, carefully striving for reform grounded in ideal principles can help shape international norms and expectations, even if perfect implementation is unattainable. Charron's call to return to the basic principles of the UN Charter and maintain caution when considering expansions to the collective security framework has become increasingly relevant in the modern context of escalating war and conflict around the world, refugee crises, the rise of cyber warfare, division among the Permanent Five members of the UN Security Council (UNSC), and the aftermath of the failed application of the R2P in Libya. An updated evaluation finds that Charron's 2007 analysis remains highly relevant, despite evolving global threats. Charron's (2007) call for cautious, deliberate reform that strengthens rather than undermines the UN's core mandate of maintaining collective security amid a resurgence of inter-state conflict is important to remember when trying to adapt to address emerging global threats.

This paper proceeds as follows. First, I will outline the geopolitical concerns that were fore of mind in 2007. I establish Charron's assessment of the effectiveness of the proposed doctrines against Claude and Naidu's theoretical framework of the seven ideal elements of collective security. I then turn to a description of how the R2P was operationalized in Libya. This is followed by an analysis of the R2P and the Duty to Prevent in the modern context against the same seven ideal elements of collective security framework Charron used in 2007 (36). I then discuss the new threats and rapidly evolving geopolitical context in 2025. Finally, I conclude with some final thoughts on Charron's analysis and the future of collective security. While Charron analyzed the idea of Duty to Prevent in 2007, it was never fully fleshed out as a doctrine and has never been operationalized. Therefore, the focus of this paper's analysis is on the R2P and collective security.

The Evolving Role of the UN in Collective Security: From Cold War Certainty to 21st Century Complexity

The world plunged into the 21st Century with hope and promise for a more peaceful international order. The fall of the Soviet Union brought on expectations for a more collaborative and effective UN and the 1990s saw a sharp increase in the number of UN peacekeeping and conflict resolution missions (Bellamy and Luck 2020, 15; UN 2020). This inspired global anticipation of a more concrete role for the UN in this "new" world order which saw the United States as the hegemon, a new Russian Federation looking to be an active member of the international community, and a China finding its footing. The world

hoped to look beyond the traditional state framework and focus on improving the conditions of individuals within the state (Bellamy and Luck 2016, 24; Annan and Mortimer 2016, 24). The 1990s shifted focus from interstate conflict in a Cold War context to civil wars and unconstitutional changes of government in Africa, Yugoslavia, and Haiti. The 2000s required another shift and shattered the illusion that the world could coast on an assumed “peace dividend” following the end of the Cold War. The focus was now on international terrorism. The UNSC was expected to solve all of these conflicts, and the record of success was ultimately disappointing.

In 2007, Andrea Charron explored the limitations of the UN’s collective security framework in a contemporary context and advocated for its modernization to address evolving threats to international peace and security. Charron’s analysis is shaped by the optimistic political climate of the early 2000s as well as the emergence of unprecedented threats to international peace and security. The UN Charter outlines solutions to address violations of state sovereignty, but these pacific tools (in Chapter VI) and the use of force (in Chapter VII) are not always appropriate or adequate instruments to address more pressing modern threats to international peace and security. These threats include immediate and violent dangers like genocide, human rights violations, civil wars, terrorism, and weapons of mass destruction as well as larger, more latent issues like climate change, poverty, and infectious diseases (Charron 2007, 33, 49).

This optimism was quickly tested as the terrorist attacks against the United States (US) on September 11, 2001, shocked the world and prompted a sharp refocus from human security back to state security concerns. This direct attack on a powerful and seemingly impenetrable state resulted in a significant transformation of global security priorities. The events of 9/11 highlighted the rise of asymmetric warfare and threats from non-state actors. Additionally, uncertainty over how to address these new threats and the following US-led invasions of Afghanistan in 2001 (which received UNSC blessing) and Iraq in 2003 (which did not) revealed significant divisions between UN Security Council (UNSC) members.

The US intervention in Afghanistan began as a collective response to a direct attack by Osama bin Laden, who was harboured in Afghanistan by the Taliban, against the United States. The subsequent war on terror was focused on capturing Osama bin Laden and his Al Qaeda terrorist network. NATO and coalition states participated. Over time, many of the NATO states began to equate “winning hearts and minds” with the best way to collect intelligence on the movement of Al Qaeda and the Taliban from local Afghans. This involved western militaries conducting projects such as building schools, eradicating opium farming,

and building roads to improve the lives of Afghan citizens, but the world had to confront the reality that sometimes intervention makes delicate local situations worse and makes civilians targets of violence (Gordon 2020).

Al Qaeda now had a world-wide network and operated in Africa and the Middle East, including Iraq. An interventionist-minded President George W. Bush sought to end Iraq's alleged, and later proved non-existent, nuclear weapons program and launched a war with the United Kingdom against Saddam Hussein's Iraq in 2003 without explicit UNSC authorization (BBC 2004). This exposed the challenges of maintaining collective decision-making within the UNSC in the face of unilateral actions. The international arena was confronted with the reality that unauthorized uses of force, unilateral decisions, and international conflicts would continue in the modern era, with the UN remaining ill-equipped to prevent or mitigate large-scale conflicts when permanent members of the UN Security Council are involved.

Simultaneously, the rise of globalization and rapid technological advancement in the 1990s and 2000s resulted in the development of new threats that the UN's collective security framework was ill-equipped to confront. Conflicts within a state or between states, non-state, and private actors, genocide, human rights violations, civil wars, and terrorism arose as unprecedented challenges. Additionally, the world is now subject to the agenda of multinational corporations that cannot be fully regulated within any single nation, resulting in human rights abuses and climate impacts without accountability. The impact of these issues on the world's increasingly interconnected financial, health, telecommunication, and transportation systems strained the traditional state-centred security model that the UN Charter was created to address in 1945. Global interdependence became more intense and complex, resulting in the unprecedented escalation of security threats to the international level (Annan and Mortimer 2016, 73). These complex threats require more comprehensive and innovative responses, which the UN struggled to develop.

To address these emerging issues and maintain international peace and security in a changing context post-Cold War, discourse centred on two new doctrines: the R2P and the Duty to Prevent, and how they might expand the scope of the existing UN collective security framework to accommodate the emerging threats and new actors on the world stage. The R2P outlined the principles by which the UNSC should authorize international intervention or the use of force in a sovereign state to protect populations from mass atrocities such as genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing (Evans and Sahnoun 2001, XI-XII). Similarly, the Duty to Prevent was intended to be an offensive extension of

this effort to prevent international security threats from malicious actors with weapons of mass destruction (WMD). However, the latter concept was much more controversial because it would authorize the proactive and potentially pre-emptive neutralization of terrorists or rogue states with WMD (Feinstein and Slaughter 2004, 136). Both proposed doctrines required a significant re-evaluation of the UN's historical conceptions of sovereignty and challenged individual state's national interests and were therefore heavily debated.

The UN Charter (1945) strictly establishes a principle of non-intervention in the domestic jurisdiction of any state (Art. 2, Sec.7). The R2P allows the UNSC to authorize the international community to use military force to address a domestic conflict as an "exception" to Article 2(7) of the UN Charter. In other words, the UNSC can meddle in the domestic jurisdiction of a sovereign state if it was unable or unwilling to protect its people. Such an exception would never have been permitted under the UN Charter previously. The fear was always that great powers would use this exception as a guise for aggression against smaller states. The R2P broadens the scope of threats the UN addresses with force and shifts the idea of sovereignty from a state's right into a sense of state responsibility. Therefore, these new doctrines would considerably change the principles of the UN Charter and the scope of the UN collective security framework.

R2P and the Duty to Prevent: Assessing Compatibility with the Seven Ideals of Collective Security

In "Expanding the UN's Collective Security System," Charron assesses R2P and the Duty to Prevent against the original ideals of the UN's collective security system to determine their compatibility. Charron (2007) insists that the UN is still an important forum to coordinate state actions to maintain international peace but argues these modern threats are urgent and numerous and require solutions beyond the capacity of the UN's collective security capacity at the start of the 21st century (33). Charron supports the call to update and adapt the old collective security system but advises that these proposals should maintain the original UN Charter's delicate balance between the powers of the international organization and the respect for national sovereignty. While the Charter has struggled to live up to the ideal of collective security, it is still important to review how these new doctrines engage with these ideals to ensure the principles of collective security are not disregarded in this expansion of the principles of the UN (Charron 2007, 34).

R2P and Duty to Prevent in Theory: Navigating Collective Security's Foundational Ideals

First, the aims of the proposed doctrines must be thoroughly understood. The UN Charter (1945) was created on the principle of state sovereignty, specifically stating that “nothing contained in the present Charter shall authorize the United Nations to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state” (Art. 2, Sec. 7). However, haunted by the insufficient international responses to the genocides in Rwanda and Srebrenica in the 1990s, former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan advocated for the expansion of UN’s collective security framework to include the prevention of humanitarian crises within the domestic jurisdiction of states. Annan insisted that “it cannot be right, when the international community is faced with genocide or massive human rights abuses, for the United Nations to stand by and let them unfold to the end” (European Parliament 2009).

Therefore, R2P proposed that national authorities have a primary responsibility to protect their citizens from mass atrocities. Thus, when nations fail in this promise or are unable to protect their people, the responsibility shifts to the international community to protect citizens against the threat, even if the threat is the nation's own government (Evans and Sahnoun 2001, XI-XII). This doctrine frames human rights violations within a state as threats to international peace and security, giving the UNSC jurisdiction to dictate international responses to domestic events (UN 1945, Art. 42). According to R2P, the international community has the responsibility to prevent these internal conflicts, react to humanitarian crises with appropriate measures that could include the use of force, and rebuild and promote stability after a military intervention (Evans and Sahnoun 2001, XI).

The Duty to Prevent builds on R2P’s reimagination of Article 2(7) to provide a preventative measure against immediate threats to international peace and security. The Duty to Prevent argues that rogue states and terrorists with WMDs require the proactive or even pre-emptive use of force for self-defence. Currently, Article 51 of the Charter recognizes an inherent right of self or collective defence, but the armed attack must have taken place first (UN 1945, Art. 51). In the case of nuclear weapons, this may mean that the target state might never be able to respond. The authors, Feinstein and Slaughter, argue that traditional non-proliferation efforts are ineffective against WMDs. Thus, the collective security framework should be expanded to include the use of force for self-defence before these imminent threats can materialize (Feinstein and Slaughter 2004, 136-7).

Though norms surrounding intervention have evolved over time, for example, from responding exclusively to inter-state conflicts to civil wars, the scope and scale of modern-day humanitarian crises requires a reconceptualization of the collective security framework

to include intervention in sovereign states. This reconsideration, however, was normatively and ideologically difficult, especially for the Permanent Five members. Charron (2007) evaluates the UN Charter, R2P, and the Duty to Prevent within the framework of the seven ideal elements of collective security defined by Claude in 1971 and Naidu in 1975 (36). These elements are a benchmark for assessing the effectiveness of the UN's collective security system and its adaptability to these proposed doctrines.

Applying the Framework: How R2P and the Duty to Prevent Align with Collective Security Ideals

The first element is the prohibition of arbitrary, unilateral force (Charron 2007, 37). Restrictions on the use of force are enshrined in the UN Charter (UN 1945, Art.2 Sec.4). However, the UNSC retains authority over the use of force in efforts to maintain international peace and security and states reserve the right to the use of force for self-defence as per Article 51 (UN 1945). This principle and these specific caveats are based on well-established norms of international law. Charron (2007) notes that the R2P and the justification of military force for domestic humanitarian interventions lack the same legal precedent and are much more contested (42). The concept of R2P is not new, it draws on the early “just war” theory that justified wars against immoral enemies. However, this idea has since been replaced by treaties, like the UN Charter, that outlaw traditional war (Charron 2007, 41). Therefore, many feared that a return to this more liberal interpretation of international law might weaken the existing collective security system or be abused by actors with ulterior motives —such as using the guise of civilian protection for regime change or the complete takeover of a state (Charron 2007, 42).

Although the United States has used a doctrine of unilateral pre-emption as justification for the widely criticized Iraq war in 2003 without requisite UNSC authority, the pre-emptive and offensive use of force outlined in the Duty to Prevent has even less legal precedent (Charron 2007, 45). Additionally, the specific advocacy of rapid escalation to force for WMD threats is incompatible with the prohibition of pre-emptive force as a norm of collective security (Charron 2007, 46).

The second ideal element is the collective guarantee of security that requires all states to assist a victim state (Charron 2007, 37). The UN Charter supports this by giving the UNSC the responsibility to determine breaches to the peace and prescribe subsequent action, including the potential use of force (UN 1945, Art. 42). Article 24(1) confirms that member states “confer on the UNSC primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security” (UN 1945, Art.24 Sec.1). However, the veto power of the five permanent

members of the UNSC (P5) results in some conflict situations being ignored in order to protect the national interests of one or more of P5 (Charron 2007, 39). R2P faces the same limitation as it relies on the approval of the UNSC's willingness to authorize the use of force (Evans and Sahnoun 2001, XII). The UN has shown a willingness to intervene in domestic conflicts with peacekeeping missions to protect civilians (such as Rwanda, Somalia, and the former Yugoslavia), suggesting that the necessary political will might not be too difficult to obtain with this peacekeeping precedent (Charron 2007, 43). However, the problem in these cases was that the resources were often inadequate and the assistance too little to save lives.

The Duty to Prevent would face even more opposition, as only small "coalitions of the willing" have been amenable to the preventive use of force (Charron 2007, 46). Therefore, operations based on the Duty to Prevent are unlikely to receive UNSC's approval or achieve a collective guarantee.

The third ideal element is collective force as a deterrent against individual aggressors (Charron 2007, 37). The UN Charter promises to take collective measures against threats to international peace and security (UN 1945, Ar.1 S.1). However, for R2P to be an effective deterrent, states must believe that if they commit human rights abuses, they will face armed intervention (Charron 2007, 43). The UN has a history of inconsistent application of collective security because of the vetoes of the P5 or the unwillingness of states to intervene against governments, especially those with large armies and potentially WMD (Charron 2007, 35, 43). States, therefore, can take a chance on human rights abuses with a bet that the R2P will not be applied to them, undermining the preventative intention of the doctrine. Either a P5 member will ensure that force is not granted, or too few states will be willing to sacrifice their military to "save strangers" (Wheeler 2004, 10). Similarly, international hesitation to act on the Duty to Prevent may erode the effectiveness of this tool of deterrence (Charron 2007, 46; Feinstein and Slaughter 2004, 141).

The fourth ideal element is that collective guarantees of action must be absolute and automatic (Charron 2007, 37). Breaches to international peace and security are determined by the UNSC, therefore there is no guarantee of a comprehensive or timely response (UN 1945, Ar.39). This is further complicated by the potential use of a veto that would frustrate the possibility of a collective international response (Charron 2007, 40). The R2P would be subject to the discretion of the UNSC as well, meaning that a lack of political will would result in inconsistent application and erode the ideal of automatism (Charron 2007, 43; Evans and Sahnoun 2001, XII). The Duty to Prevent is subject to this same issue of political will and inconsistent application. Additionally, international hesitancy is further complicated by

the irrationality and unpredictability of rogue states and the international community's fear of indiscriminate retaliation (Charron 2007, 47).

The fifth ideal element is the impartial assessment of the aggressor and victim, requiring the collective security system to be unbiased and above alliances and historical ties (Charron 2007, 37). This ideal is undermined if one of the P5 members is involved in a conflict and utilizes its veto (Charron 2007, 40). The definition of aggressor and victim is further complicated under the two proposed doctrines, requiring the international community to consider the cause of individuals and non-state actors as well as states. This puts the UN in the position of weighing which is more important to protect: the state as referent of security or civilian lives (Charron 2007, 43-4). Additionally, the Duty to Prevent presents the antithesis of this ideal of impartiality. This doctrine targets specific rogue states that lack "internal checks," therefore defining the aggressor based on identifiable criteria of acceptable state governance models (Charron 2007, 47; Feinstein and Slaughter 2004, 143). This is not within the scope of collective security and shifts the emphasis of the UN's collective security framework from the protection of states and citizens to the preservation of strong states (Charron 2007, 47).

The sixth ideal element is the universal definition of "aggression" and the ability to instantly recognize acts of aggression (Charron 2007, 38). The UN is reliant on member states and the Secretary General to report information and bring situations warranting intervention to the attention of the UNSC (Charron 2007, 44). With the R2P, the UN would face challenges like determining aggressors and victims within complex intra-state conflicts and humanitarian crises, while also deciding when a humanitarian situation becomes bad enough to warrant international intervention (Charron 2007, 38). The dependence on member states to provide this information results in potential biases that limit the objectivity of evaluating aggression, especially in conflicts where the P5 may be involved. The fact that Rwanda had a seat on the UNSC during the Rwandan genocide is a poignant example of this (Ngoc 2020). These decisions can also be heavily influenced by public opinion and the media, further complicating the determination of guilt (Charron 2007, 44). In the case of the Duty to Prevent, more states might agree on who the rogue states are, but there is not the same consensus around evaluating the threat level as international rather than regional. Therefore, many states would rather delay the determination of an aggressor in the hope that leaving them alone would maintain the status quo (Charron 2007, 47).

The final ideal element is that the system must be permanent, universal, and general (Charron 2007, 38). The near universality of UN membership works towards meeting this

ideal, but it is once again complicated by the veto power of the P5 that threatens the generality of the system. Charron (2007) explains that “some breaches of the peace are not subject to the collective security system principally because they involve/concern one of the permanent members” (41). This has created the issue of inconsistent application of the collective security system, which would continue with the addition of any new doctrine or expanded scope (Charron 2007, 44). Additionally, due to significant opposition to the Duty to Prevent, Charron (2007) identifies that “there is a fear that if the UN pursues the doctrine of duty to prevent as envisioned by Feinstein and Slaughter, states may choose to leave the UN rather than pursue this new corollary” (48). This would undermine the UN’s credibility and efficacy as this ideal of permanence, universality, and generality is eroded.

Though the R2P aligns with the UN’s evolving norms of collective security, it must overcome issues like the inconsistency of UN actions, volatile political will, and the difficulty of holding powerful states accountable. Significantly, in cases where a state’s government is the perpetrator, Charron (2007) identifies that the implicit requirement for regime change in the R2P’s responsibility to rebuild often conflicts with key ideals of the UN Charter (44). Despite these challenges, the R2P was adopted at the 2005 World Summit (Global Centre for the R2P 2019). As the Duty to Prevent was never fully developed as a doctrine and has never been operationalized, the focus of the remainder of this paper is on the R2P.

The First and Last Operationalization of the R2P

The first real-word test of R2P occurred in Libya in 2011. Established to protect civilians and prevent ethnic cleansing and large-scale loss of life, the R2P was invoked by the UNSC in response to Muammar Gaddafi’s use of the Libyan Air Force against civilians and threats of vengeance against rebels during a period of civil unrest during the Arab Spring (Evans and Sahnoun 2001, XII; UNSC 2011a; Rothwell and Nasu 2011). UNSC resolution 1973 (2011) imposed a ban on all flights in the airspace of Libya Arab Jamahiriya and authorized member states and regional organizations to “take all necessary measures” to protect civilians, thereby authorizing the use of force (UNSC 2011a, 3). The resulting NATO-led military intervention involved naval and air forces but no ground troops (Al Jazeera Staff in Africa 2011). Although the intervention succeeded in halting some human rights violations by the Gaddafi regime, many civilians still died, and Libya descended into a prolonged civil war (Polat 2024). The resolution’s prescriptive nature constrained NATO planners, and it lacked provisions for the responsibility to rebuild—a central pillar of R2P. Thus, this first operationalization of R2P was, in many ways, doomed from the start. The

Libyan intervention is remembered as a failure, reducing R2P from a potentially operational doctrine to a thematic concern that no longer motivates international preventative military action.

The resulting failure of this use of the R2P in Libya is due to the lack of consideration for the responsibility to rebuild and assist post-intervention recovery (Evans and Sahnoun 2001, XI). NATO's military intervention in Libya was primarily motivated by the desire to prevent a potential genocide. Gaddafi's dehumanizing reference to rebels as "cockroaches" echoed the language used by perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide (Arsenault 2011). Therefore, once the Libyan Air Force was prevented from strafing civilians and Gaddafi was captured and killed by Libyan rebels, the UNSC considered the situation largely resolved (Pessin 2011). However, this narrow focus failed to account for the long-term instability following regime change, and the post-intervention period was marked by escalating civil unrest and violence (Kirkpatrick 2011; Meo 2011). Though the immediate aftermath of the conflict was celebrated as Libyan liberation, the subsequent power vacuum brought suffering—particularly for women and girls—in conditions some describe as worse than under Gaddafi (Shelton 2017). Avoiding this adverse outcome requires intense effort to be put into the responsibility to rebuild, which the UNSC was not prepared to authorize, the resolution did not require, and NATO could not provide.

NATO's prompt disengagement from the conflict in Libya and the lack of follow-through on the responsibility to rebuild can be partially attributed to the lack of ground troops involved in the operation. The operation's primary objective—civilian protection—was carried out from a distance, as the enabling resolution explicitly prohibited "foreign occupation force[s] of any form on any part of Libyan territory" (UNSC 2011a, 3). Additionally, the Libyan rebels were not a unified group, making it difficult to support them effectively against Gaddafi's forces. Ongoing sanctions against Libya disadvantaged the rebels, who lacked access to weapons and ammunition, while Gaddafi's military retained such access (UNSC 2011b). Therefore, NATO conducted the operation primarily through aerial bombing, disconnected from the on-the-ground reality.

This reliance on remote intervention limited NATO's access to contextual information and important intelligence, leading to misinformed actions that resulted in unjustified civilian deaths. International humanitarian law mandates that attacks be directed solely at military targets (Abrahams and Kwiram 2012, 4). Human Rights Watch investigated several NATO bombing sites in Libya—where over 7,700 precision-guided bombs were dropped during the seven-month campaign—and found no evidence of legitimate military

targets at some locations (Abrahams and Kwiram 2012, 6, 15). NATO itself later admitted having “really had no idea” about the situations on the ground (Dyke 2021). This lack of intelligence and NATO’s inability or unwillingness to provide evidence for military necessity at questionable target sites raises concerns about potential violations of international humanitarian law (Abrahams and Kwiram 2012, 12). The refusal of NATO and participating states to take responsibility for civilian casualties led to political opposition and global criticism of the R2P’s implementation (Dyke 2021; Abrahams and Kwiram 2012, 6).

Critics also point to the intervention as an example of international inconsistency. Charron had previously observed that the UN and its member states tend to invoke collective security inconsistently—a concern that proved valid with the expansion of collective security under R2P (Charron 2007, 35). China, Russia, Brazil, Germany, and India all abstained from Resolution 1973 (2011) that enabled the operation due to concerns that military intervention might escalate the conflict, lead to greater civilian harm, or evolve into a prolonged engagement (UNSC 2011a, 4-6, 8, 10). These concerns were ultimately borne out by the events that followed.

The abstentions indicated a broader shift in the global power dynamics. Emerging powers, such as Russia, India, China, and Brazil expressed increasing scepticism towards Western-led military interventions. These non-Western powers feared that invoking R2P would set a precedent for foreign interference in a nation’s internal affairs—potentially directed at themselves or their allies or their allies (Chen and Yin 2020, 788). Germany, adhering to its traditionally cautious stance on military intervention, warned against entering “a military confrontation on the optimistic assumption that quick results with few casualties will be achieved” (UNSC 2011c, 4). Anti-imperialist critics also expressed concerns that the deposition of Gaddafi’s regime was motivated less by humanitarian aims and more by Western interests in controlling Libya’s oil pricing and securing energy access for US and European companies (North 2016, 404-5). These critiques underscore the perception that the R2P was applied selectively and incompletely—especially due to the failure to implement the responsibility to rebuild—highlighting the inconsistency of its operational use.

While NATO’s intervention in Libya in 2011 may be viewed as a tactical victory for deposing Gaddafi and averting his threatened atrocities, the violent aftermath of this operation and the enduring political instability render the mission a strategic failure. The humanitarian toll on civilians and the failure to secure meaningful post-conflict improvement have undermined the R2P’s credibility. This disappointing outcome marked the collapse of hopes for R2P as a reliable tool of international policy. Consequently, the prevention of

humanitarian crises—and the R2P itself—has shifted from an operational doctrine to a thematic concern (UNSC 2024b).

Libya and the Limits of R2P: A Test Case for the Seven Ideals of Collective Security

The only operational application of the R2P doctrine occurred in Libya in 2011, making it a practical case through which to assess the validity of Charron's assertions in "Expanding the UN's Collective Security System." At the time of Charron's writing, the R2P could only be evaluated theoretically against the seven ideal elements of collective security, as no real-world implementation existed. However, the Libyan intervention provides an opportunity to test Charron's analysis in practice.

The first ideal element is the prohibition of the use of force. When diplomacy and sanctions "failed" to deter Gaddafi's violence against civilians, the UNSC authorized the use of military force with Resolution 1973 (UNSC 2011a, 3). The adoption of the R2P in 2005 signalled international acceptance of the prevention of humanitarian violations as a valid exception to the prohibition on the use of force (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect 2019). Therefore, though this case does not live up to the ideal, this use of force was aligned with accepted norms. However, Charron's warning that this justification may be used as a guise for other means did become a concern in the case of Libya, with many questioning whether ousting Gaddafi was required or justified under the doctrine (Rothwell and Nasu 2011; Charron 2007, 42). There was no identified leader of the rebels and, given the lack of action against Gaddafi's decades of state-sponsored terrorism, more than a few national agendas served by authorizing force against Libyan forces to protect civilians at this specific time (Bachman 2015). Additionally, the rapid escalation to military action raised concerns about whether all peaceful alternatives had been fully pursued (Bhaduri 2021). The resolution demanding sanctions was adopted on 26 February 2011 and the authority to use force was made roughly three weeks later the 17th of March (UNSC 2011a; UNSC 2011b). Therefore, there was hardly time for sanctions to take effect or negotiations to take place.

The second ideal element is the collective guarantee of security. Though the intervention was authorized by the UNSC, five UNSC members abstained from voting on the resolution (UNSC 2011c, 4-6, 8, 10). This indicates a lack of global consensus, although it was not strong enough for any member to vote against the resolution. Since the operation of the R2P in Libya, states like China and Russia have expressed intense opposition to allowing international military intervention as a response to domestic humanitarian violations

(Chen and Yin 2020, 790). Therefore, though the specific case of the R2P in Libya was not blocked by a veto in 2011, its aftermath ensured that any subsequent interventions — particularly those led by NATO—under the R2P framework would not be permitted. This outcome aligns with Charron’s concern that members of the UNSC would use their veto to protect human rights abusers (Charron 2007, 42-3).

The third ideal element is the use of collective force as a deterrence. While the intervention in Libya did prevent future human rights abuses by the Gaddafi regime, this outcome was achieved through forced regime change and the killing of Gaddafi, rather than through deterrence (Pessin 2011). Therefore, this exercise of the R2P did not involve the use of collective force as a deterrent to prevent humanitarian atrocities. Instead, it relied on direct regime change as the preventative measure. Additionally, Charron’s concern that inconsistent application would undermine the effectiveness of the R2P also holds true after the use of this doctrine in Libya (Charron 2007, 43). The rushed authorization of force—combined with restrictions on the deployment of ground troops—meant that R2P has never been operationalized through direct military intervention *within* a state. This inconsistency in application reinforces Charron’s warning about the risks associated with expanding the use of force under the R2P framework.

The fourth ideal element is that collective guarantees of action must be absolute and automatic. The operation in Libya quickly proceeded the UNSC’s decision to intervene, with military sorties beginning two days after the resolution was adopted (Rothwell and Nasu 2011). Despite some members abstaining from the decision, the intervention had enough political will to move forward relatively quickly and a ready-made military alliance to conduct the operations. However, the inability to operationalize any similar responses to humanitarian atrocities that would warrant a R2P response interrupts this automaticity and confirms Charron’s concern that there would be a lack of consistent application.

The fifth ideal element is the anonymity of the aggressor and victim. Charron was concerned that the UN would be reluctant to “denounce the actions of individuals” (Charron 2007, 43). The UNSC avoided this complication by keeping the issue at the state level and identifying the “Libyan authorities” as the aggressor, rather than naming Gaddafi individually (UNSC 2011a, 1). Instead, the UNSC referred Gaddafi to the International Criminal Court’s prosecutor for crimes against humanity and he was specified on the travel ban and asset freeze list in the annex of Resolution 1970, which was adopted unanimously (UNSC 2011b, 2, 9). Though the UNSC does not typically target state leaders, the UNSC had no issue with

naming Gaddafi directly for the crimes. Therefore, the potential issue of comparing individual and state actions was applicable to the case of Libya in 2011.

The sixth ideal element is the definition and instant recognition of acts of “aggression.” The UNSC agreed that this was a humanitarian atrocity, but Russia, China, India, Brazil, and Germany did not agree with the decision for military intervention (UNSC 2011c, 4-6, 8, 10). However, the international community did have consensus that there were violations of human rights in Libya that were a threat to international peace and security and assigned guilt to Gaddafi’s regime (UNSC 2011a, 1; UNSC 2011b, 2, 9). Therefore, this case of the use of R2P aligns with this collective security ideal. This case was not complicated by the involvement of a P5 state’s national interests, which makes Charron’s concerns over the potential inconsistent application of the R2P when P5 states are involved inapplicable.

The last ideal element is the that the system must be permanent, universal, and general. The invocation of R2P in the case of Libya in 2011 was intended to be a precedent for responding to mass human rights abuses in the future. However, the controversial aftermath of this intervention undermined the credibility of R2P as a permanent, universal framework. The failure to ensure stability in Libya and criticisms of the incomplete and selective use of R2P in this case weakened the doctrine’s general applicability, reducing it to a collective security theme rather than an operational doctrine (Lopez 2015).

Overall, the use of R2P in Libya was implemented similar to how Charron theorized the application of the doctrine would unfold. The situation in Libya did not involve the national interests of any P5 states and therefore was not subject to a veto. However, the limited collective participation and the failure to ensure post-conflict stability undermined the legitimacy and prospective future of the operationalization of the R2P framework. This case demonstrates the challenges of expanding the UN’s collective security framework that Charron had highlighted. The case of Libya further serves as a warning that the UNSC still struggles to organize a coherent strategy when it requires interventions to protect lives. Overall, the Libyan example illustrates the difficulty of applying R2P and its ideal principles to complex real world situations.

The UN at 80 and the Legacy of R2P

When Charron wrote for the UN’s 60th anniversary in 2005, the organization was already confronting a range of emerging challenges that had not been anticipated by the original Charter. At that time, however, the idea of a rules-based international order still held firm. Now, as the UN marks its 80th anniversary, those challenges have only multiplied in

scope and complexity—while the rules-based order lies in disarray. Since the failure of R2P in Libya in 2011, the UN no longer possesses sufficient tools to address these crises and has lost much of the hope it held at the turn of the century that a practical and comprehensive solution would be found. Additionally, the UN collective security system is facing some of the worst humanitarian crises in places like Sudan and Gaza, millions of conflict and climate refugees, unprecedented geopolitical contestation between the five permanent members of the UNSC, and the aftermath of the failure of R2P.

If the need to rethink the UN's collective security framework was urgent in 2005, the need to reorganize and reinvigorate the UN's efforts towards sustainable peace is now critical, without even considering the existential threat that is climate change. The geopolitical realm has become increasingly populist, divisive, and isolationist. In 2023, the UN reported that the world is facing “the highest number of violent conflicts since the Second World War” (UNSC 2023). Therefore, Charron's (2007) assessment that “war is no longer the main preoccupation of states” was not correct (49). While her assertion that “rather, poverty, infectious diseases, bloody civil war, weapons of mass destruction and terrorist cells are the gravest threats to the world's survival and the well-being of individuals” proved to be accurate, violent conflict and war continued to increase alongside the rise of these other threats (Charron 2007, 49; Bucholz 2023). Additionally, Charron did not account for climate change, a key factor that exacerbates poverty, disease, and conflict.

This violent shift can be seen in the large number of major global conflicts that the international community is struggling to address. Sudan is currently facing one of the worst humanitarian disasters on record with widespread violence, ethnic cleansing, mass displacement, attacks on critical infrastructure, and a suffering healthcare system (Crisis in Sudan 2023). Despite human rights investigations and humanitarian aid appeals from the UN and other humanitarian organizations, this conflict is only worsening with no end in sight (UN General Assembly 2023; Humanitarian Crises That Demand Your Attention Now 2025). A similar scenario can be seen in Gaza, where unprecedented devastation from the Israeli military occupation has resulted in overwhelming death tolls, the displacement of 90% of the population, and the destruction of 92% of homes (OCHA 2025; Humanitarian Crises That Demand Your Attention Now 2025). Haiti is also experiencing a violent political crisis that is exacerbated by natural disasters that have ravaged the country and its infrastructure resulting in an acute humanitarian crisis and mishandled UN assistance that led to cholera outbreaks (UN 2024a). Major conflicts and humanitarian catastrophes like these are happening all around the world, with each of them facing unique and complex challenges

but sharing common themes of violence, displacement, shortages of essential services, and growing apathy from the international community.

As a result of this increased conflict and humanitarian crises, the world is facing a refugee crisis. The displacement of persons pushes these conflicts onto the international arena no matter how hard more stable nations try to avoid it. In 2024, The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that over “114 million people were displaced by war, violence and persecution.” This high figure is due to climate change, the legacy of colonialism, and the rampant disregard of the basic rules of war, resulting in mass amounts of international humanitarian law violations every day. Humanitarian programs are substantially underfunded and unable to provide the support that this crisis requires. Although most of these refugees flee to neighbouring countries in the developing world, Western countries are affected by mass displacement too. The resulting economic implications on already struggling economies has resulted in political and social polarization on the topic of refugees and a reluctance to provide funding to the UNHCR or other humanitarian initiatives (UNSC 2024a).

The general rise in geopolitical aggression is exacerbated by the increasing opposition between factions of the permanent members of the UNSC. China, France, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and Russia make up the five permanent members of the UNSC. After the fall of the Soviet Union, there was hope that the world would enjoy the benefits of a more cooperative UNSC. Instead, the “P2” of China and Russia have been increasingly at odds with the remaining P3. Although China and Russia abstained from the 2011 decision to act on R2P and intervene in Libya, they have since hardened their opposition to humanitarian intervention based on the fear of interference due to human rights abuses in their own territory (Chen and Yin 2020, 790-2; Gordon 2020). Most of the vetoes since 2006 have been cast by Russia and China, demonstrating the establishment of a veto partnership within the UNSC (UN 2025). Not only is this because of the brazen and illegal annexation of parts of Ukraine by Russia, but because Russia has direct military interest in Syria as a base for Russian influence in the Middle East and therefore vetoes many UNSC resolutions related to the region, even if the resolutions have a humanitarian focus (Barber 2019). Though China does not have direct interests in either conflict, China has justified its veto by appealing to the principles of sovereignty and non-interference (Brar 2023). In addition to this frustration, the United States has similarly vetoed UNSC resolutions calling for ceasefires or humanitarian access in Gaza to protect American military interests in Israel (UN 2023; Middle East Eye Staff 2024).

This veto-wielding standoff in the UNSC has interrupted the process of humanitarian aid initiatives and delayed the efforts of the international community to find solutions to these issues. Charron identified political will as a potential impediment to R2P and its humanitarian strategy. She warned that “political realities are still factors that could ‘override’ the Responsibility to Protect despite the legal green light” (Charron 2007, 43). This is exactly the case in many instances of humanitarian atrocities that are blocked from being addressed by the international community because of a P5’s use of their veto to protect national interests and allies (Charron 2007, 43). The failure of R2P in Libya and the international community’s apprehension against operationalizing it again has emboldened Russia and China and opened the door for humanitarian violations without fear of repercussion (Roth 2022). Despite continued humanitarian crises, there is a deep reluctance to risk a repeat of the failure in Libya and China and Russia will never again abstain on a resolution that has a more liberal interpretation of sovereignty and international intervention. R2P is still an important thematic issue that brings attention to humanitarian crises and has been invoked in more than 90 UNSC resolutions and Presidential Statements since 2005, but there is no future for the operationalization of this doctrine (UN 2024b).

Among all these developments, the most significant change in the modern era is the increased complexity of threats to states and conflict between states. Technological advancements, increased interdependence through globalization, and changing environmental factors have combined to create new ways to states and non-state actors to destabilize countries and regions outside of the traditional definitions of violence. The UN Charter was created to address conflicts between states, and R2P was created to address humanitarian crises *within* a state, but there are other emerging transnational threats that the international community currently cannot easily define and therefore cannot definitively assign responsibility or effectively address.

Cyberattacks that disrupt critical infrastructure, economic coercion through trade wars or currency manipulation, dis- and mal-information campaigns that influence public opinion, and environmental disasters that create resource scarcity are being weaponized to sow division and disruption. These new, not easily attributed tactics short of force are used between P5 members, such as the United States and Russia, complicating the UNSC’s ability to address them without facing a veto (Stradinger 2024). The inability to identify and define these adverse interventions in a state’s domestic affairs means that the UN cannot assign responsibility and coordinate a collective response like it does with traditional and attributable threats. Additionally, the contemporary international landscape is further

challenged by non-traditional security threats like the COVID-19 pandemic, the growing strength of criminal gangs, cartels and terrorist groups, shadow or black maritime fleets, and the climate crisis (UNSC 2022; Samoškaitė 2025).

Finally, the UN is still struggling to address traditional issues like wars between states and the difficulty of supporting stabilization efforts in areas of past military intervention. Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine serves as a blatant violation of the UN's monopoly on the use of force and a violation of state sovereignty protected in the UN Charter. Despite this, the UNSC has not been able to make any resolutions on the situation due to Russia's ability to veto as a permanent member (UN 2022). Additionally, the aftermath of failed Western-led military operations in places like Libya in 2011 and Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021 are still casting a dark shadow on international intervention and violent foreign-imposed regime change (Gordon 2020). These failures have confronted the international community with the idea that staying out of these internal conflicts may be less damaging to local populations (Luttwak 1999, 38). The world is facing new threats but is also still grappling with traditional conflicts, blatant infringements of the UN Charter, and the aftermath of the UN's legacy of intervention. Most damning is that the rules-based order, upon which operations and interventions are possible via the authority vested in the UN Charter, is disappearing.

The Future of Collective Security

The future of the UN and collective security depends on its ability to adapt to contemporary challenges while maintaining its core principles of peace and cooperation. Despite the hope that the 21st Century would see less conflict and contestation between states, the international stage is instead facing similar conditions to the tense and hostile environment of the post-war period the UN Charter was created to address. While there has been a rise in new international challenges, there are many factors that have remained constant since the development of the UN Charter. Despite globalization, sovereign states are still the primary actors and decision makers on the world stage. The legitimate use of force is still codified in the UN Charter as limited to cases of self-defence and UNSC authorization. Decisions to use collective force are still constrained by the veto power of the P5 members of the UNSC. The geopolitical realm is still shaped by the interests of powerful states that often prioritize national interests over collective security. Therefore, the UN's collective security framework is still applicable in many aspects of the international arena.

However, as Charron noted in 2007, the exponential evolution of new threats to the collective security landscape demands an update to the UN's collective security framework. The most coercive tools in the UN Charter are still sanctions and the use of force but the use of R2P in Libya demonstrates that these traditional instruments are not sufficiently able to address more modern and complex threats in today's world, especially if applied in a crisis and with uneven support among key states. Therefore, while new approaches must be explored, they should be pursued with great caution to avoid undermining the existing collective security framework. The international community must strike a careful balance between addressing emerging, interconnected threats and fulfilling its longstanding role of managing conflicts between states—an increasingly frequent challenge.

With the failure of R2P to comprehensively address the humanitarian crises the world hoped it would and other attempts to adapt the UN to this changing landscape moving slowly or proving unsuccessful, Charron's (2007) key question of whether "the UN's security system, as opposed to some other alliance system, is best placed to preserve the peace" has become increasingly relevant (50). Despite the need to develop more comprehensive approaches to emerging issues, the current context is a lot less hopeful than the geopolitical climate was twenty years ago. There are some viable proposed reforms to the UN that have recently been put forward like the "pact for the future" aimed at addressing global challenges such as climate change, artificial intelligence, inequality, and poverty, or renewed discussions of changes to the distribution of seats and the expansion of the UNSC (Lederer 2024). However, these potential developments do not directly or comprehensively address the most pressing emerging threats to international peace and security.

The *raison d'être* of the UN is the maintenance of international peace and security among sovereign states. While the institution has thus far succeeded in preventing a third world war, its future is threatened not only by emerging and non-traditional challenges—such as the rise of non-state actors, climate change, and pandemics—but also by an unprecedented resurgence of traditional geopolitical aggression (Koplow 2016, 135). Though the UN is still a valuable institution, the future of the world's approach to security may involve a new strategy for the expansion of the UN's collective security framework or could possibly be developed through an institution outside of the UN. While coalitions of the willing remain an option, future iterations may no longer be limited to Western alliances.. These efforts should be informed by past failures to expand the collective security framework with R2P or the Duty to Prevent. Additionally, efforts to update the world's approach to

these emerging issues should be guided by the normative direction of the seven ideal elements of collective security.

Despite the world's pledge in 2007 to focus on preventative action of mass atrocities via R2P, the consequences of the institution's military intervention in conflicts have been discouraging. The lesson to be drawn from R2P is that even the best intended attempts to solve the world's most pressing problems will face challenges mapping onto the existing geopolitical order and applying to complex real world scenarios. Instead, maybe the UN's role is better suited to post-conflict involvement and geopolitical restoration after the dust has settled in regional and internal conflicts. Though R2P will likely never be operationalized again, the international community should revisit one of its key pillars, the responsibility to rebuild, and focus on facilitating the mending of the previous wounds foreign intervention has caused and the injustices inflicted on civilian populations as a result of all wars. In a world of ever-evolving threats that are impossible to predict and difficult to address through existing collective security frameworks, we need to work towards new and innovative solutions. However, it is important to take the warning from Charron that the UN should revisit the basic principles of the Charter, and the international community must remain cautious when trying to adapt to a changing world, lest the scourge of world wars be revisited.

Conclusion

This updated paper demonstrates the importance of assessing proposed reforms against theoretical frameworks. Many of Charron's predictions about the potential outcomes of applying R2P came true, and if the international community heeded those cautions, some of the criticisms of the failed use of R2P in Libya may have been avoided. It is important to show that academic cautions have validity and should be considered when applying novel ideas or reforms of long-standing systems to complicated real-world contexts. Further research may inquire into how other authors similarly assessed the potential application of the R2P doctrine compared to its outcomes in Libya, thereby possibly providing additional theoretical frameworks that can be used to assess future reforms.

In an increasingly complex and interconnected world, the relevance of Charron's 2007 analysis of UN reform and collective security endures. Her caution against overly ambitious reforms remains pertinent, especially as the international community faces both a resurgence of inter-state conflict and the emergence of non-traditional threats such as climate change, cyber warfare, global pandemics, and the rise of non-state actors. Through the framework of Claude and Naidu's seven ideal elements of collective security, this paper has

shown that while R2P remains the most significant attempt to operationalize new norms within the existing UN framework, its limited application in Libya reveals the persistent challenges in achieving consistent, legitimate, and effective collective action. Therefore, the real-life application of R2P and its evident weakness were consistent with Charron's analysis and predictions from 2007. Lessons learned from this experience, specifically the importance of following through with supporting doctrines like the responsibility to rebuild after the use of force or other reactions to conflict or humanitarian crises, should be remembered when considering future reforms or alternative methods to address non-traditional threats.

Due to the number of emerging non-traditional threats, there is growing recognition that the UN alone may not be equipped to manage the evolving crises of the 21st century. Though the UN's traditional collective security framework remains an important pillar in the prevention of large inter-state conflict amid a resurgence of international hostility, the development of complimentary institutions or alliances may be necessary to fill critical gaps. New bodies of the UN may be developed to address transnational issues like climate change, global pandemics, or cyber warfare. New proposals for UN reform to better address humanitarian crises or non-state actors may arise that take the lessons from the failure of R2P into consideration. Alternative alliances may form to focus on regional-specific conflicts and issues. However, any new proposals must reinforce, rather than replace, the UN's central role in maintaining international peace and security.

Even though real-world application of ideal doctrines, like R2P, often fall short when confronted with complex political realities, the normative pursuit of a more just and effective system of collective security remains both valid and necessary. Charron's analysis underscores the importance of considering political realities when trying to pursue normative ideals. R2P failed because of a political unwillingness to follow through with the support of Libya after the military intervention despite agreeing to the responsibility to rebuild alongside the responsibility to react in 2005. The good intentions of R2P and its normative direction fell apart when applied to a complicated situation with mixed levels of commitment from participating states. Striving for reform grounded in ideal principles like R2P and Claude and Naidu's seven ideal elements of collective security can help shape international norms and expectations, even if perfect implementation is unattainable. However, as Charron highlights, such efforts must be approached with caution and an understanding of the geopolitical context in which they unfold. New principles should be supported by clear mandates and sustained political will to ensure that honourable intentions are not lost in practice. Ultimately, reform must be approached with the same caution Charron advocated for two

decades ago: enhancing the UN's capacity to respond to today's challenges without compromising the legitimacy, coherence, and collective foundation of existing security frameworks.

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