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Book review category: International organization, law and ethics

***Reviewing the Responsibility to Protect: Origins, Implementation and Controversies*, Ramesh Thakur, Abingdon, Oxon, Routledge, 2019, 256 pages, £115 (hardcover), £37 (e-book)**

Ramesh Thakur is a distinguished scholar and an experienced practitioner. *Reviewing the Responsibility to Protect*, a collection of Thakur's key essays on the responsibility to protect, with a new introduction and conclusion, draws on his academic expertise in the field of global governance and international security, and constitutes an insider's account of advocacy for norms associated with the nascent human protection regime. Thakur served on the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS) as one of its members and drafted key passages of the report that resulted from the deliberations and international consultations. The book encapsulates his thinking and paints a vivid picture of his perspective on the principle and central issues of implementation. Taken together, the essays convey his sustained engagement with three central themes: protection responsibilities, and their implementation; collective responses and international norms; and relations between core and periphery, between states of the global North, and those of the global South.

On the theme of responsibility, Thakur suggests the responsibility to protect has helped reshape the way we think about protection today, reconfiguring the relationship between states and individuals. It has helped promote the idea that sovereignty entails responsibility, and that sovereignty is contingent on the capacity and will to meet this protection responsibility. The responsibility to protect also helped reshape the way we think about intervention. He suggests the responsibility to protect has successfully replaced the concept of 'humanitarian intervention' – a misnomer, Thakur suggests, given that 'there is nothing humanitarian' (232) about warfare as a means of protection – in the popular discourse; although armed intervention 'cannot be taken off the table' as an option of last resort (ibid.).

This leads to a second central theme. The responsibility to protect, Thakur suggests, served to address collective inaction, as in the case of Rwanda, on the one hand, and unilateral intervention, as in the case of Kosovo, on the other. Through its formula of 'sovereignty as responsibility', threshold criteria for intervention, and its emphasis on Security Council authorisation of the use of force, it sought to address the concerns of states opposed to 'humanitarian intervention', and thereby encourage consistent and robust collective responses to egregious violations of human rights. Thakur outlines the corrosive effect of unauthorised responses on the fledgling protection regime, and advocates for principles-guided humanitarian action in line with international law and customary practice, specifically the Charter stipulation that any use of force must be authorised by the Security Council. The responsibility to protect, Thakur suggests, 'will help to shift the balance towards interventions that are rules based, multilateral and consensual' (232). In that context, Thakur criticises the Libyan intervention for exceeding its mandate and pursuing regime change. Leaving the regime in place but containing it, Thakur suggests, would have been the least bad option of a range of problematic options; a limited intervention would have protected civilians 'at less cost and controversy' (151). The events in Libya, Thakur suggests, also shaped outcomes in the case of Syria, 'by raising doubts about the long-term results of military action' (152).

Third, a recurring theme in the book is that of North-South relations. This manifests itself in two ways. First, Thakur criticises a dearth of scholarly perspectives representing the global South. 'All too often', he suggests, 'developing-country views either fail to get a respectful hearing at all in Western policy and scholarly discourse, or are patronisingly dismissed' (85). Second, the responsibility to protect was salient not just because it reconceptualised the relationship between state sovereignty and human rights protection, but also because it took seriously the concerns of developing states. 'To dismiss their claims', Thakur suggests, 'is to deny their history and disrespect their collective memory' (146).

In describing origins, implementation, and controversies, Thakur provides a compelling defence of the responsibility to protect. He makes a strong case for the increasing significance of the principle, notwithstanding that much work still lies ahead in promoting its implementation. The book is an excellent introduction to the responsibility to protect for all those unacquainted with the subject matter; but it is also immensely valuable for those familiar with the field, detailing the insider's account of the early days of the conceptualisation of the principle and a history of almost two decades of sustained advocacy. The book blends sophisticated scholarly analysis with the wisdom derived from practice. It is highly recommended reading.