



Policy Memo

DATE: November 5, 2014

SUBJECT: Advancing Transatlantic Linkages on Responsibility to Protect and Mass Atrocity Prevention

Transatlantic allies have built an important strategic and historical relationship, including affirming their commitment to cooperative action to prevent atrocities through vehicles such as the World Summit outcome document endorsing the Responsibility to Protect (R2P). Yet, practical strategies and plans for cooperative action have lagged behind aspirations and normative frameworks.

At the 55th annual Strategy for Peace Conference, from October 15–17, 2014, near Washington, DC, the Stanley Foundation convened a group of 30 US government and international officials, mass atrocity specialists, and civil society representatives to examine the current state of transatlantic cooperation and explore avenues for enhanced collaboration for atrocity prevention. Participants brought a wide range of expertise to bear on the questions posed and investigated both normative and operational challenges to increasing cooperation between states and among international organizations and civil society actors on both sides of the Atlantic.

Participants focused on four key elements for advancing a transatlantic agenda on R2P and mass atrocity prevention:

- **Shared focus on and understanding of prevention:** In examining the roles of the United Nations, the United States, and development in atrocity prevention, as well as the case of Libya, participants agreed that the primary focus remains on response to threatened or ongoing atrocities rather than on preventing them before they begin. To move international stakeholders closer to prevention objectives, cultivating shared conceptions of preearly warning indicators and actionable upstream prevention toolkits would be a significant step forward.
- **Developing shared diagnostic capacity:** The most frequently discussed gap in capacities that could potentially be addressed through transatlantic cooperation was shared diagnostic assessments of at-risk situations.

- **Learning from challenges and maturing norms and institutions:** Participants recognized the progress that has been made in integrating R2P and atrocity prevention at the conceptual and, to a lesser degree, operational levels. The track record of these processes to date is not the final word on prevention, and the limited successes and shortcomings present avenues for continued learning and improved methods.
- **Critical inflection points on the horizon:** With the upcoming changes in leadership at the United Nations and in Washington, institutionalizing prevention structures and mainstreaming practice will face a critical juncture in the coming years.

The Role of the United Nations in Atrocity Prevention

The United Nations (UN) presents a critical avenue for pursuing transatlantic cooperation on atrocity prevention. The issues raised during the discussion focused on continuing to develop R2P as the primary framework for prevention within the UN system. Participants examined ways transatlantic players could push for greater mainstreaming and common understandings, create space for engagement and dialogue on prevention, and address operational challenges and shortcomings at the United Nations.

The challenges discussed during this session indicated the difficulty of confronting atrocities and the prices of success and increasing acceptance of the R2P norm. The original conception of R2P was a tremendous leap forward for prevention, but there were inherent shortcomings. As participants noted, it was too state-focused and therefore missed critical aspects of prevention, including the role of civil society actors and the impact of individual decision makers in implementing the responsibilities to which they agreed.

In examining the role of the United Nations in atrocity prevention, participants were asked to apply a transatlantic perspective and assess opportunities and impediments in the current system. In examining this dimension, they focused on opportunities to move the needle from response to prevention and ways to enhance operational aspects of atrocity prevention. Transatlantic cooperation offers the potential to engage key actors well before the “early warning” phase and to take action long before these issues appear on a formal agenda at the United Nations through the multiple points of intersections with at-risk countries.

A critical component of successfully moving toward prevention is developing shared diagnostic capacities among like-minded, capable actors. Essential aspects of this analysis include deep understanding of the context and participatory assessments. Additionally, a common lexicon and understanding of prevention, mitigation, and protection of civilians are essential for effective analysis and implementation among actors at the United Nations, the European Union, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

The United States and Atrocity Prevention

The United States remains the most forward leaning country in developing domestic policy and structures for atrocity prevention as well as a leader in prevention efforts on the international stage. President Barack Obama declared that preventing mass atrocities is a core national security interest and moral responsibility of the United States in inaugurating the administration’s efforts. However, progress to date remains measured. Structures for preventions,

most notably the Atrocities Prevention Board, have been created, but the complex processes driving atrocities continue to result in the intentional killing of civilians in many conflict prone countries. The focus of this session was on the potential for transatlantic actors to learn from the experience of the United States and to critically examine the next steps for improving US capacity for prevention and response.

In assessing US efforts to date, participants discussed lessons that could be derived from progress on creating prevention structures and impediments that have limited results to date. These subjects included dedicated budgetary and human resources for prevention; shared understandings of what is meant by prevention and early warning, as well as the toolkits available to policymakers and mechanisms for connecting recognition of an at-risk situation to response; and limitations on transparency for investigating successes and failures of these efforts.

Development Assistance and Prevention of Mass Atrocity Crimes

Development presents opportunities for information sharing and shared diagnostic assessments as well as operational mechanisms for reducing the risk of mass atrocities. Development actors tend to be on the ground, gathering information to inform their work and forming relationships with local actors. Recognizing and communicating information at these levels makes development professionals a potentially strong node for connecting the dots for early warning and taking preventative action. Development actors also have critical roles in prevention, mitigation, and recovery. Through programs seeking to prevent conflict and build resilience, provide humanitarian assistance and assist political transitions, and support transitional justice and trauma-healing activities, development touches each phase of atrocity response.

While development offers avenues for prevention and response, its activities are not without risks. Whereas countries with established institutions and economic systems tend to be at low risk for atrocities, states in transition have presented serious challenges to development objectives. Development professionals should consider how to balance the need to build stronger state institutions and gain legitimacy for their aid effective programs without supporting corrupt or discriminatory regimes. In a worst-case scenario, these efforts may inadvertently augment the capacity of perpetrators to commit atrocities or increase the motivation to maintain their hold on power.

Evaluating Atrocity Prevention: The Case of Libya

The NATO-led and US-supported intervention in Libya in 2011 is frequently cited as an example of a successful intervention to protect civilians under the auspices of R2P that subsequently exceeded its original mandate to include removing the regime of Muammar Qaddafi. However, evaluating atrocity prevention through this case draws out a much broader range of issues than this narrative takes into account. In the final session, participants held a wide-ranging discussion on Libya as a case that demonstrates the need for further development of R2P as it continues to be more accepted and a greater focus on developing more robust doctrine and practice for prevention.

While the case of Libya is often seen as involving the implementation of a doctrine of intervention, participants discussed this case as illustrative of the need for and absence of a comparable prevention doctrine. While Libya is an example of action, where clear, credible, and

imminent threats against civilians galvanized momentum, participants noted that as a whole, the international community is still focused on response rather than having a strategic approach to prevention.

Conclusion

Transatlantic cooperation on atrocity prevention is one critical dimension for leveraging the full scope of capabilities to reduce the risk of these crimes being committed and to end violence against civilians once it has begun. The goal of calling on this segment of the international community is not an exercise in exclusivity, but rather a means for greater collaboration among like-minded, capable states. Having greater cooperation among traditional donor states then sets the table for more-productive engagements at the United Nations, with development agencies, and with regional organizations and domestic actors.

The approaching transitions at the United Nations and in the United States government make the next few years a critical period for R2P and atrocity prevention. Each UN secretary-general determines his or her priorities and signature issue and is unlikely to select the same ones as his or her predecessor, so where R2P and prevention fall on the agenda will be important to watch. Similarly, a new administration in Washington will need to be educated on these issues as new priorities are defined.

Additional information about this roundtable and others held as a part of the 55th annual Strategy for Peace Conference is available on our Web site:

www.stanleyfoundation.org/events.cfm?id=487.

The analysis and recommendations included in this Policy Memo do not necessarily reflect the view of the Stanley Foundation or any of the conference participants, but rather draw upon the major strands of discussion put forward at the event. Participants neither reviewed nor approved this document. Therefore, it should not be assumed that every participant subscribes to all of its recommendations, observations, and conclusions.

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About The Stanley Foundation

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