

Human Rights in International Relations

This week's readings:

- Tarquinio, J. Alex. "The U.N. Has Turned Turtle on the Ukraine War." *Foreign Policy*, 7 Apr. 2025.
 - Kuperman, Alan J. "The Moral Hazard of Humanitarian Intervention" *ISQ*, March 2008.
 - Fortna, Virginia Page. "Interstate Peacekeeping". *World Politics*. July 2004.
 - Keck & Sikkink. "Transnational Advocacy Networks" in *Activists Beyond Borders*. 1998.
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Big questions:

1. How effective are international norms and institutions in protecting human rights, especially when powerful states resist?
2. What are the intended and unintended consequences of international efforts (like intervention and peacekeeping) aimed at enforcing human rights protections?
3. What role do non-state actors play in promoting human rights?

Whose problem is human rights?

In the post–World War II era, **human rights** moved from a primarily domestic concern to a core topic in global governance. Activists, NGOs, states, and international organizations are now central participants in human rights campaigns.

The tension between sovereignty vs. human rights

- **Sovereignty:** States have absolute authority over internal affairs.
- **Human rights:** Some assert that states have obligations to protect basic rights.

Should the international community intervene to protect HR, and if so under what circumstances?

The UN Security Council: Institutional Limits

The UN Security Council (UNSC) is supposed to maintain international peace and security. However, its effectiveness is severely limited:

- **Distribution of veto power:** The five permanent members (P5: US, UK, France, Russia, China) can block any resolution. Russia's veto prevented UNSC condemnation of its invasion of Ukraine.
- **Great power politics:** National interests often override collective action, even in the face of atrocities. The UNSC becomes a stage for diplomatic conflict rather than cooperation.

The UN General Assembly: Symbolic Power

While the UNSC is often deadlocked, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) can pass resolutions reflecting broad international opinion (e.g., condemning Russia's invasion). However, UNGA resolutions are generally non-binding and act more like expressions of global sentiment than enforceable law.

State-led Humanitarian Intervention

Some assert that the international community has a "*Responsibility to Protect*" (R2P) populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. This implies a duty to intervene, possibly with force, when a state fails to protect its own people.

How do states enforce HR?

- **Naming and Shaming:** Publicly identifying and condemning states for human rights violations to pressure them into compliance.
 - **Critique (Hafner-Burton, 2008):** Shaming may lead to **substitution** (improving on shamed issues while worsening others) or **backlash**.
- **Rights Ratings:** Quantifying and publishing country human rights performance serves as social pressure (Kelley & Simmons, 2015).
 - **Strategic Behavior:** Countries lobby to improve their ratings (Pevehouse & Vabulas, 2019) and criticize allies on easy issues while targeting adversaries on harder ones (Terman & Byun, 2022).
- **Peacekeeping.**
- **Military intervention**

The moral hazard of intervention (Kuperman, 2008)

Kuperman argues that the *expectation* of humanitarian intervention can create a perverse incentive structure:

- **Provoking retaliation:** Rebel groups within vulnerable populations might intentionally provoke state crackdowns (genocidal violence) to attract international intervention, believing it will help them achieve political goals (e.g., secession).
- **Imperfect insurance:** Intervention, when it occurs, is often too late or insufficient to prevent mass atrocities against civilians, even if it eventually aids the rebels.
- **Unintended consequences:** The norm of intervention, intended to save lives, may inadvertently *cause* some genocidal violence by encouraging high-risk rebellions that wouldn't otherwise occur.

Peacekeeping: Modest but effective? (Fortna, 2004)

While humanitarian intervention involves potentially forceful action against a state's will, traditional *peacekeeping* operates with the consent of the belligerents, usually after end of conflict.

Mechanisms of Peacekeeping

Peacekeepers (unarmed monitors or lightly armed forces) can stabilize peace by:

- **Raising costs of attack:** Making surprise attacks harder, acting as a buffer, potentially invoking international diplomatic costs for violators.
- **Reducing uncertainty:** Monitoring cease-fires, providing neutral information about compliance, serving as a credible signal of peaceful intentions (by accepting peacekeepers).
- **Preventing accidental escalation:** Mediating local disputes, investigating incidents, providing channels for complaints other than immediate retaliation.

Effectiveness and Selection Bias

- **Peacekeeping works:** Controlling for the fact that peacekeepers are often sent to the most difficult situations (where peace is likely to fail anyway), Fortna finds that peace lasts significantly longer when peacekeepers are present.

Other problems

- Arrival of UN peacekeepers is associated with increased sex trafficking and child sexual abuse.
- UN peacekeepers caused a cholera outbreak in Haiti that killed at least 10,000.

Non-State Actors: Transnational Advocacy Networks, NGOs

Beyond states and formal IOs, *Transnational Advocacy Networks* (TANs) play a crucial role in promoting human rights. TANs include NGOs, local social movements, foundations, media, churches, etc., bound by shared values and dense information exchange.

How TANs Emerge: The Boomerang Effect

When domestic groups are blocked by their own government from seeking redress for rights violations, they can activate international allies (NGOs, foreign states, IOs). These allies bring external pressure (diplomatic, economic) back onto the violating state. (See constructivism slides)

How TANs Work: Politics of Influence

TANs use specific strategies to pressure states and IOs:

- **Information Politics:** Quickly generating credible, politically usable information (e.g., documenting abuses) and disseminating it effectively. Framing issues in compelling ways (e.g., “female genital mutilation” instead of “circumcision”).
- **Symbolic Politics:** Using symbols, stories, and actions to make distant issues resonate (e.g., the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo).
- **Leverage Politics:** Calling on powerful actors (states, IOs) to apply material pressure (aid cuts, sanctions) or moral pressure (“mobilization of shame”) on target states.
- **Accountability Politics:** Holding powerful actors accountable to their stated principles and commitments (e.g., using the Helsinki Accords against the USSR).

TANs and Sovereignty

TAN activity inherently challenges traditional notions of sovereignty by asserting that how a state treats its citizens *is* the business of the international community and by creating channels for domestic groups to bypass their own state.

Ethical issues with TANs and NGOs

- **“Disaster porn:”** Images of people suffering in the aftermath of disaster are often circulated without the permission or knowledge of those pictured.
- **Unintended consequences:** Banning cobalt imports from DRC because of child labor led to poverty and job losses for already vulnerable families.
- **Democratic deficit:** NGOs and TANs are not accountable to the people for whom they advocate.

Reflection questions:

1. **Tension Between Sovereignty & Rights:** Does humanitarian intervention violate sovereignty, or is it justified when states harm their own citizens?
2. **Moral Hazard vs. Moral Responsibility:** Balancing the need to respond to atrocities with the risk that intervention might provoke more rebellion. Which to choose?
3. **Security Council Constraints:** Great power rivalries hamper quick responses. Should we reform the UNSC?
4. **Transnational Activism & Norm Shift:** Do advocacy networks reshape international norms and do they influence state behavior?