

Introduction

On 27- 28th June 2019, the United Nations General Assembly held a plenary meeting on the “Responsibility to Protect (R2P) and the Prevention of Genocide, War Crimes, Ethnic Cleansing and Crimes Against Humanity”. This was the third time R2P had been considered by the General Assembly in a formal debate. A total of 71 states and regional organisations participated in the talks, 10 of which were from the Asia-Pacific. This included Fiji on behalf of the 18 countries that make up the Pacific Island Forums, and Marshall Islands on behalf of the 10 countries Pacific Small Islands Developing States. Statements were also made by the Republic of Korea, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, Bangladesh, Australia, Japan, China, Myanmar and the Philippines. Of these countries, the majority used the opportunity to voice their support for R2P, with the exception of Myanmar and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea who challenged the application of R2P. A range of topics and issues were discussed, with reoccurring emphasis on the importance of regional organisations, sustainable development and veto restraint. These key themes appeared throughout the statements made by the countries of the Asia-Pacific, as the countries discussed the successes and challenges of the resolution.

Fiji and Marshall Islands spoke in behalf of the Pacific Islands Forum and the Pacific Small Islands Developing States respectively, strongly advocated for the effectiveness that regional partnerships had in the prevention of atrocities. Fiji referenced the success of the Biketawa Declaration, which was agreed upon by all members of the Pacific Islands Forum in 2000 and served as the foundation for numerous regional assistance missions. In particular, Fiji argued, the 2003 – 2017 Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) could not have seen the success that it did without the declaration or the cooperation from 15 countries from the region, who responded to the early warning signs and worked to de-escalate the situation. By helping to restore civil order and rebuild the economy, the participating countries provided assistance to create the foundation for long-term stability. Fiji maintained that RAMSI was an example of “Pillar 2 of R2P in action” and the diversity of cultures and perspectives of participating states was an essential aspect of its success.

The Marshall Islands and Australia echoed this sentiment, with both countries citing the 2018 Boe Declaration as a movement toward the recognition of prevention and collective action as a means to strengthen regional security and stability. Marshall Islands viewed these regional agreements as “critical for the protection of our people”, corroborated by Australia’s statement that leaders from the Asia-Pacific “have long recognised our collective vulnerability and the need to address such challenges at the regional level”. As such, it was widely agreed that regional organisations and collective action are essential in operationalising R2P.

Prompted by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, many states from the Asia-Pacific brought up the need to strengthen countries’ development efforts to avoid the creation of unstable situations as a means of preventing atrocities. China cited this as the key to implementing R2P, stating that the symptoms and root causes of conflict should be resolved, with a focus on the “eradication of extreme poverty and uneven development”. Bangladesh made similar points, advocating for the strengthening of countries to prevent atrocities, and also emphasised the importance of providing support to local humanitarian organisations, women and youth organisations. The role of women in atrocity prevention was also highlighted by Japan and the Philippines, as both held the view that by empowering women, coupled with the strengthening national institutions and security capacities, the protection of human rights and prevention of atrocities can be ensured.

Recognising the need for sustainable development as a preventative measure also requires the identification of vulnerable areas, as discussed by Marshall Islands who maintained that there was a heightened sensitivity in regard to the Pacific location of the Pacific Small Islands Developing States. It also recognised the multidimensional nature of security, which incorporates a number of areas including environment.

Several states raised questions about the veto power of the UN Security Council and called for restraints to be placed on the veto in situations involving atrocities and the application of R2P. Five states from the Asia-Pacific, namely the Republic of Korea, Australia, Bangladesh, Japan and the Philippines, maintained that vetoing action should be refrained from in particularly urgent situations. Japan and Australia voiced their support for the France-Mexico Initiative on Veto Restraint, with Japan citing the Security Council's veto function as the reason for past and current failures to prevent mass atrocities. Korea and Bangladesh were also in agreeance that veto power should be limited in cases that required immediate action, such as those of genocide, ethnic cleansing, crimes against humanity and war crimes, and Bangladesh used Myanmar as an example of the consequences that comes with vetoing action against such atrocities. In addition to this, the Philippines assessed that for R2P to be successful, it must be impartial, evidence-based and free from the selective views and politics of the Security Council's veto power. In doing this, double standards and "tragic revivals of colonial influence" can be avoided.

However, not all agreed that the power of the veto should be restrained. China held that the international community must obtain authorisation from the UN Security Council before any action is taken. They also placed particular importance on the need for respect toward sovereignty, territorial integrity and the political independence of states when considering R2P, which was seconded by Myanmar and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Myanmar held that over-emphasising the role of international institution would undermine the rule of national institutions" and it would be more beneficial if states developed preventative mechanisms and policies best suited their individual situations to resolve disputes peacefully.

While the 2019 UN General Assembly Plenary Meeting on the Responsibility to Protect saw a variety of opinions and views on different aspects of R2P, it was evident that there was a common support for the continuation of formal discussions of R2P in the UN General Assembly. The statements made by the countries and organisations from the Asia-Pacific gave light to what the region held particularly important, as well as the contested issues that existed in the area. The importance of regional organisation, the preventative powers of sustainable development and the varying views on veto restraint will be important to consider in future discussions about the implementation of R2P in the Asia Pacific.

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