

EVAP Episode 47_ Alexander Bellamy

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SPEAKERS

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall, Alexander Bellamy

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 00:00

Welcome to Expert Voices on Atrocity Prevention by the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect. I'm Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall, Director of Policy and Research at the Global Centre. This podcast features one-on-one conversations with practitioners from the fields of human rights, conflict prevention and atrocity prevention. These conversations will give us a glimpse of the personal and professional side of how practitioners approach human rights protection and atrocity prevention, allowing us to explore challenges, identify best practices, and share lessons learned on how we can protect populations more effectively. Today, I'm joined by Alex Bellamy, Professor of Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Queensland, Australia. Thanks for joining us today, Alex.

Alexander Bellamy 00:44

Thanks for having me, Jackie.

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 00:57

Alex, you've been one of the most prominent scholars of R2P since its inception, what first drew you to this area of research and policy?

A

Alexander Bellamy 01:07

So I, my route towards R2P was a bit circuitous. So my PhD was on former Yugoslavia, then the wars in the former Yugoslavia, that got me into things thinking about things like peacekeeping and humanitarian intervention, which then, of course, got me interested in R2P and the work of the International Commission that was led by Gareth Evans and Mohammed Sahnoun. So I was looking at R2P right from, right from the very beginning and have to admit that between the time of the Commission in 2001 and the the World Summit in 2005 I was a little bit of a skeptic. I didn't think that Gareth and Kofi Annan and others would succeed in persuading member states to sign on to R2P, and was happy to be proven wrong. And it became clear in 2005 that R2P was a significant new international development and that sort of refocused my research interest. So whereas R2P became, originally was one of several things I was interested in, peacekeeping, peacebuilding, intervention, being others, it then shifted to being kind of my main focus, largely as a result of the consensus in 2005.

J

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 02:18

You know, one of the reasons we invited you on this month in particular is because September marks 20 years since the UN World Summit and the adoption of R2P. As we mark 20 years since the World Summit, what would you say has been R2P's greatest achievements?

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Alexander Bellamy 02:39

So when we work on R2P and we think about prevention of atrocity crimes, it's a perpetual emergency, right? It is the nature of the work that we do in relation to R2P that there is always an emergency, always somewhere, and always a keen sense that international responses aren't adequate, because we live in a world that isn't perfect. We live in a world of politics of clashing values and interests, where even when those values and interests are aligned, responding to atrocity crimes or preventing atrocity crimes is difficult business. But when you look back over 20 years, you see there have been some really significant changes. I was reviewing a piece on peacekeeping the other day, and the piece on peacekeeping I was reviewing kind of implied that the idea of peacekeepers protecting civilians had been around for decades and decades and decades. In fact, that idea only precedes R2P by five years, the very idea that peacekeepers might protect civilians was new. Today we look at the field of atrocity prevention, and we look at the research on the causes of atrocities, the sort of response and prevention toolbox, the wide range of measures that can be undertaken by the Council, the Assembly, other UN arms, regional organizations, individual states, none of that existed in 2005. In fact, there wasn't a field of study called atrocity prevention in 2005. You had genocide studies, and you had some niche work on genocide prevention, you had some work on peacekeeping. You had some work on humanitarian intervention, but you didn't have a consolidated understanding of the causes of atrocity crimes. You didn't even have a concept of atrocity crimes back in 2005, let alone a suite of practices and set of expectations about it. So I think one of the big things that R2P has done has been to recalibrate both academic thinking and academic research, but also political practice around the expectation that the international community ought to be preventing these crimes, a shared understanding of what these crimes are, and a growing understanding of the sorts of tools, measures and strategies that might be put in place when we see risk of these crimes and evidence of them. And it's now, a kind of a whole field of study and of practice, you know, from diplomacy to sanctions to peacekeepers doing civilian protection to local communities doing civilian protection, to reporting, to criminal investigations, to victim-centered approaches to peace building that simply didn't exist in 2005 and I think it's easy from the vantage point of 2025 to pick holes in all of that to see all the deficiencies and problems. But to do so is to not understand just how new this whole field of work is, and that field of work was, in a sense, brought into being by that consensus in 2005.

J

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 05:59

You know, picking up on the idea of a field of work and the scholarly side of R2P, you know as part of your work, and you know the immense number of publications you've done on R2P. You worked extensively with the first Special Advisor, the late Edward Luck. How did Ed's scholarship impact your own work, and what do you see as the most important contribution he made to the evolution and development of R2P?

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Alexander Bellamy 06:28

Yes, Ed. Ed kind of influenced and touched all the work that I did on R2P, and reshaped the way that I think not just about R2P, but about the United Nations and world politics more generally. And he had this knack of being able to take the long view on the position of the UN, to understand where we should be optimistic about what the UN could do, but also be realistic

about the limits and to situate the UN within broader politics. I remember one of the pieces he wrote about the role of the UN in atrocity prevention, he makes the point of saying, yes, the UN isn't perfect in atrocity prevention, but it's no worse than any other institution. It's not like there's another institution out there, be it a regional organization or a member state that is better than the UN on atrocity prevention, and that's because the challenges are huge. So Ed really taught me to be realistic, to think about, well, the UN is a political organization. It's an organization full of states that have different perspectives, different values, different interests, and see the world differently. And when you're working in and through the UN what you're trying to do is to find common ground, find ways in which you can mobilize and unite those states. And it's not always going to be possible, because there are going to be situations that are so close to the vital interests of states that they're not going to want to find common ground. There are going to be times when some states think there are priorities greater than preventing atrocities or protecting populations, that there are things more important than that, and they're going to make life difficult, but just because you can't manufacture a compromise or common ground on everything, doesn't mean there aren't some things that you can and you can think creatively about the different ways in which you can find common ground. That gets me to really the first thing I learned from Ed about R2P and consensus building was to take seriously the objections of states that disagree with you. So Ed, when he first started in the role of Special Advisor, he had a filing cabinet, and in that filing cabinet he had a file on basically every state that was critical of R2P, and he in the file, he would he would file away all the kind of critical comments that they would have, as well as other speeches on other things that they were were talking about, maybe general human rights talk and things. And he made a point in this first year of spending much more time with states that were critical of R2P than with states that were supportive of R2P, because he understood that if R2P was going to have a long lifespan at the UN you had to build consensus. And the only way you could build consensus was by paying lots of attention to what the critics were saying, and taking their concerns seriously and thinking of ways in which you can sell R2P in a way that they might be comfortable with, understanding that you're trying to lay some foundations. You're not reaching for the endpoint immediately. You're understanding that this is something that you want to have a lifespan, and you want to lay some foundations. So with that information and Ed, you know, he, I remember, I was going to a reception with Ed, where he literally walked in the door and then was kind of pigeonholed by half a dozen sharply critical ambassadors, and basically spent the entire evening standing in the corner debating R2P with them, with the ambassadors from places like Venezuela and Sudan, of which Ed was criticized at the time and people criticized him for spending so much time with the critics and said, well, he needs to be working with the like-minded more. But Ed's view was always from a UN perspective. He was thinking, well, we've got lots of principles on which the like-minded agree. What makes R2P different from those is this is something on which we have consensus from 2005 and he used that in then framing that 2009 report of the Secretary-General, which frames the language that we still use to talk about R2P. And again, when we think about the history of R2P, it's worth remembering that it's not until 2009 that we get things like the three pillars, like the idea that R2P is an ally, not an enemy, of sovereignty. And those, of course, are ideas that Ed embedded in the in the Secretary-General's report. Ed was always very clear on things like the three pillars. He was he was always very clear in saying that this isn't what the states have agreed, you won't find the three pillars explicitly mentioned in the in the in the World Summit agreement. This is the Secretary-General's interpretation. This is a way of thinking about the three pillars. What's really interesting, and when I read the Global Centre's report of the GA debate this year on R2P, is just how deeply embedded those those concepts and terms and ideas now are in the way that states, both friends of R2P and those more critically-minded of R2P, those basic terms

created by Ed as a kind of a foundation for consensus are still, even as kind of international consensus on a whole lot of things, including R2P, is fragmenting, that those terms are still there and they're still the common language that states use to debate and evaluate R2P.

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Alexander Bellamy 06:28

Yeah, of course. I mean R2P, like the history, you can tell the history of R2P in all sorts of ways. And one of the ways of telling the history of R2P is from from an African point of view, of seeing in most accounts of R2P start in or around Rwanda, but from Rwanda on, there's also an African story about how the AU, of course, developed its own concept of sovereign responsibility, embedded that in the AU charter, and how, on a whole lot of ways, when we think of the practice of prevention and the practice of civilian protection, the AU attempted to be ahead of the UN. So in developing protection mandates, in peacekeeping, in developing more coercive responses to imminent atrocities. And of course, ECOWAS too was well ahead of the UN in terms of practicing rethinking sovereignty and thinking about the responsibilities of sovereigns. And of course, on things like norms against coups as well. So we all know there's a relationship between unconstitutional changes of government and risk of atrocities. Well, the AU kind of led the way in understanding the relationship between unconstitutional changes the government and future instability, and so tried to develop its own regional norm. So you can tell a story of R2P from a regional point of view, where regional organizations like the AU and ECOWAS are front and center. You can do that for lots of regions. You can do something similar for Latin America. And what's interesting is, if you compare, say, the African story and the Latin American story, those two regions took quite different approaches. Different historical reasons, but also because they were facing different sorts of challenges. So in Latin America, there is very much a kind of a human rights focus and a very much a legalistic focus in the approach that the region took. One of the worrying things is that when you tell those regional stories, and you bring it up to the here and now in the last few years, just like the global story, some of the regional stories have started to fall apart, which suggests that some of the challenges we're facing today are not just produced by one or two. It's not just the Trump administration. It's not just the global financial crisis. It's not just COVID, it's you've got things happening at regional levels of well as well. So if we were telling the Africa story, there's a story about how in the last 5 to 10 years, the project of African regionalism has started to go off the rails a little bit too, and that's because of things happening at the AU level. Things happening at the level of different governments in sub-Saharan Africa as well. In Latin America, things are still continuing to progress. Things have become a little bit more fragmented because of political changes with certain governments. In Southeast Asia, we had a we had a period of expansion and development when ASEAN developed its own human rights mechanisms, which was a bit of a kind of a landmark for an organization like ASEAN. But again, we're seeing a kind of, we've seen a kind of a freeze on some of that, some of those things have become largely inactive and we've seen a kind of a walking back. So the regional level is absolutely crucial, because for something like R2P to survive, it has to be kind of internalized and adopted by individual states, by their societies. Societies have to come to a view that they expect their governments to do certain things to prevent certain atrocity crimes, both at home, but also to play a role in the region. Of course, if societies don't expect their governments to do that, it's unlikely that governments will feel the need to do it, so local ownership and regionalization is absolutely fundamental in making the principle sustainable in the long term. But what that's going to mean, what it already means, is that the principle and the way in which it's implemented is going to be slightly different from place to place. Different places are going to understand it differently, and they in particular, they're going to understand what the best pathway to

furthering it is going to be, and that's how it should be, because every region has a different history, has a different geography, has different sets of core norms and values, and there is no one single pathway to implementing R2P. So that's why regionalization is crucial. And when you think about the UN as well, the UN can only do and can only go as far as its member states are allowing it to go. So the UN will go as far as member states themselves have kind of socialized the norm, and have themselves taken on responsibility for implementing the norm. If the more that they take on that responsibility in their own way, the further the UN can go, the more that they back away from that, then the more constrained the UN's going to be.

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Alexander Bellamy 08:11

Yeah, and Ed was great believer as well, as you had to, you had to confront things head on. You couldn't shift things away. So in 2009 he tried to conceptualize the whole thing, including taking on some of the difficult issues. But it was Ed when, in the wake of the Libya intervention, when the whole issue of Pillar Three was incredibly controversial, it was Ed that persuaded the Secretary-General for the next report needed to be on Pillar Three, that they needed to address those issues sort of head on. And what was remarkable about that was, again, you had a report in the wake of the Libya controversy that sort of set out Pillar Three and located the use of force within the broader range of pillar three measures, and identified the two elements of pillar three, and that report went down quite well. I mean, the critics were critical, but given the context of 2012 and the immediate aftermath of Libya, again, it was telling that lots of member states got and spoke. Most of the member states welcomed the Secretary-General's report, and it provided a catalyst for a debate at the time. Then, of course, Brazil was introducing the idea of responsibility while protecting, and said it was commentary on that in the report. But Ed was always very much of the mind that you needed to have these debates front and center, and R2P, in a way, he often said this R2P should make governments uncomfortable, because it's precisely because governments aren't doing enough to protect populations from atrocities that we need R2P, and so you need to have those uncomfortable conversations. And if everyone's feeling happy and comfortable all the time, then you're not really doing your work. You've got to push a little harder. So Ed always combined the kind of search for consensus with then a pushing. So one of the things I mentioned this file that he had, one of the things he used to do with his file is whether a government would say something critical about R2P, he would find something else that they've said about, say how they support human rights, for example. And he would make an appointment with the ambassador, and he'd go and sit with the ambassador and say, well, look, you've said this about R2P, but you know, three months ago, you said this about human rights, so how can you, how can you be opposed to R2P, but say that you're in favor of fundamental human rights when R2P is also embedded in the Charter, and then he'd use that as an opportunity to have have a conversation. And there's a whole, a whole set of states that shifted like, for example, Malaysia is a good example that shifted from being initially quite skeptical about R2P to them being kind of not necessarily one of the key supporters, but at least kind of understanding that this was a direction the UN ought to be moving in.

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Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 12:12

It was really an incredible report. You know when you work in the weeds on R2P for so long, like you, obviously it's canon. You read it, you understand it, and then you kind of forget it beyond the three pillars. And I remember last year, I was rereading the report, and there were so many things that, today people present as sort of new ideas or things they've considered on ways to improve on R2P, and it was all there in the report like very clearly articulated, very eloquent, you know, all straight from, from Ed's mind onto paper. And so it was sort of incredible how much of that 2009 report has stood the test of time.

J

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 15:04

You know, to turn a little bit to your own work, you've often emphasized the importance of regional actors and local ownership in atrocity prevention. You know, what are some success stories or promising examples of of this approach? And how do you think R2P can be better localized without losing this kind of global commitment?

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Alexander Bellamy 21:12

Yeah, and definitely, I'm also just thinking in terms of the Security Council and the degree to which they defer to the regions which, you know, I can think of cases in West Africa where ECOWAS was really very forward thinking, and that produced a positive result for places like Cote d'Ivoire and Guinea and Senegal, Mali too, in the beginning, versus, you know, the role of ASEAN and in Myanmar, where it seems like three years, no, four years later, you know, the Council is still deferring to what ASEAN wants and letting them take the driver's seat, but they don't really want to do much.

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Alexander Bellamy 22:09

Absolutely, I think that's absolutely, I think, especially in cases where none of the P5 have vital interests, the role of regional organizations as sort of gatekeepers for the Security Council is absolutely critical that when you don't have P5 vital interests at stake, but you have an active regional organization that wants the Council to act, it's much more likely that you're going to find common ground in the Council, and that the Council is going to move in ways, and sometimes in ways that, as a matter of principle, some council members, you might think, well, how are the Chinese happy with signing off on this resolution? Yet you'll find that where you have an active regional organization, and where, say, China or Russia or states don't have vital interests that they are prepared to move because, as well, the Council has a corporate interest in its own legitimacy, that it understands that where you have active regional organizations that want to do things, if the Council just blocks the regional organization, eventually the organization is just going to go off and do it anyway, without the Council, and the Council's centrality will be undermined. So, yeah, I think that's absolutely right. Of course there's a thick red line on the gatekeeper role of regional organizations when it comes to crises where P5 members have vital interests, or think they have vital interests, and Syria is the kind of classic example there where you had for a moment, a surprisingly activist Arab League, but that didn't persuade the Council. Well, let me rephrase it. I mean, the Council did, I mean the one of the kind of bizarre things about Syria is that we haven't read a whole book about the UN's failure in Syria, yet, the Council did pass dozens of resolutions. Some of those resolutions referenced R2P and civilian protection. Some of them in the history of the Council were sort of landmarks, like the Council disarming Syria of its chemical weapons, authorizing the delivery of humanitarian aid without the consent of the government. Now those things didn't work, but if you look at the history of the Council, the Council had never done that before in its entire history. Yet on Syria, where you have the vital interests of the US and Russia at stake, where you have three of the P5 disagreeing on almost everything and thinking that this is a major crisis for their own geopolitical interests. Even there, humanitarian considerations was enough to get the Council to adopt multiple resolutions and even do some innovative things, as I said, they weren't successful, but the very fact that these states thought that they ought to do something, they ought to find common ground, tells you something about the shifting kind of moral and normative basis of world politics. They wouldn't have, the point being, they wouldn't have felt the need to do something 30 years earlier. 30 years earlier, the Council probably wouldn't have even met on Syria, and if it had, its first dozen meetings, would have been debating whether Syria really should be on the agenda or not. And that's because of that normative shift.

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Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 25:23

That's an incredible way of thinking about it. I think, you know, in the midst of the Syria crisis, watching the vetoes, watching where they weren't succeeded, it really, you know, you really have that dread and that feeling that nothing was ever going to kind of alleviate the crisis, and there was no kind of moral low that was too low, but it is true that they did make some progress.

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Alexander Bellamy 25:52

Yeah, this is what this is one of the things that I learned. Another one thing that I learned from Ed was when you look at the history of the UN and how quickly things have changed. So you compare that, even if you go back to the 90s, and you think UNPROFOR in Bosnia. So, in the 90s, you have a UN mission called the UN Protection Force. That's its name, but it doesn't actually have a mandate to protect civilians, and that's in the mid 90s. That's just 10 years before R2P. Then you go back to the 70s, and you think of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. You know, in three and a half years, they kill a quarter of the entire population of the country. Yet it doesn't even get on the Security Council agenda. The council is like, no, this isn't for us, this is internal. So one of the signals of change, it is unthinkable that that sort of thing would happen without it getting on the agenda of the Council. Now you could say, Well, what about Gaza? Is that a sort of similar thing? What you're seeing, though, is the pressure to act, the pressure to act that you didn't see in Cambodia. So yeah, Gaza, you have a situation where you have one of the parties in a deep and close relationship with one of the P5, and that has always been a block on action. You know, Russia, the States, China, have always protected their close allies. But nevertheless, you're getting this pressure to act, which, again, we take for granted nowadays, but you wouldn't have had a few decades earlier. And I think the other thing that we've seen, which was sort of foretold, but I think a little unexpected, was that, as the Security Council has been blocked, so other arms of the UN have become more active. So the blocking of the Council in the last 10 years has made the General Assembly much more active than it used to be. As you know, better than I do, you know the work of trying to get the Human Rights Council engaged in R2P, it took longer to get the Human Rights Council engaged, and it took to get the Security Council engaged. But now the Human Rights Council is engaged, and yes, you've got difficult politics there, and sometimes it has some odd votes and sometimes it doesn't go as far as we want, but the Human Rights Council is engaged and it's increasingly active. So again, this is kind of a sign that the normative floor has shifted, and where our core institutions aren't delivering, member states are looking for alternative pathways to go, well, we can't get the Council to act, but what can we do? What are the tools we can use with the General Assembly, or the Human Rights Council, or with regional organizations?

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Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 28:34

You know, on the, I guess, on the topic of Syria. Since you've written so extensively on the atrocities there and the considerable failures we had to stop what was happening until this past December, when Assad fled. You know, what lessons do you think we can draw for the future in terms of tools that are successful or things that just absolutely didn't work in the approach to a crisis like Syria?

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Alexander Bellamy 29:11

Yeah, great question. So the difficult sort of headline argument of the book that I wrote about Syria, and this is a difficult one, is that ultimately, only the use of force was ever going to work. The regime was so wedded to survival because it thought that the physical survival of itself and the groups it represented depended on its survival, and for its survival meant continuing to control Syria's security forces. For the opposition, any negotiated agreement that left Assad in control of the security forces wasn't worth the paper it was written on, because this was a

regime that was, had used, you know, systematic violence and torture to maintain order. So the question of who control the security forces was absolutely fundamental to the whole issue, and it was clear from the very outset that Assad had no intention whatsoever of negotiating away his control of the security forces. The only thing that could push him and the regime to move on that was the realistic prospect or actualization of military defeat. So the hard thing about that case, the hard kind of lesson from that case, is that there are for as much as we want to kind of broaden the range of tools and measures that we use, and broaden the range of institutions, there are going to be some cases in which only the use of military force, or something like military force, is going to bring things to a resolution, and Syria was always going to boil on until the regime fell. Right? It came sooner than I thought it would. But it was always going to be the case that the opposition there were always going to keep going, even if it had taken decades to get there, because this was a regime based on torture and violence. It's not based on any kind of grounding of legitimacy. That said, there are all sorts of intermediate lessons about there are things you can do to make situations better or worse. One of the key things with Syria, and we saw it in Sri Lanka, and we saw it all the way back after the Rwandan genocide, is to remind ourselves that humanitarian aid is political, that it is always going to be manipulated by actors in the field for their own benefits, and that we need to think about the effects of aid, about how actors in the field are going to use it, and also about how the international community wants to use it to achieve good effect. So in the Syria case, we know that, you know the regime, it manipulated aid. What it did was, was blockade opposition held areas, prevented aid getting in, whilst accepting aid into government areas. Because of that and because the international community was desperate to deliver aid, what it did was it delivered huge amounts of aid into government controlled areas whilst opposition controlled areas starved. Now, what that did was support the regime in a whole lot of ways. Firstly, by, by basically keeping the civilian population in regime held areas going. It meant the regime itself could concentrate all of its efforts on the war effort. It also allowed the regime to say, well, look, we're clearly better than the opposition. Look, life in regime held areas is much nicer than life in opposition controlled areas, because, of course, there's opposition controlled areas that are being starved. The regime was kind of quite explicit. Plus you had the more kind of explicit things of the regime taking a cut of money, of foreign aid, going directly to the regime. You know that in Assad Syria, there is no such thing as an independent civil society. Every civil society organization had a member of the regime somewhere close to the top. And so you had the indignity of UN agencies funneling millions of dollars to organizations where there was an Assad at the top of the organization. So, thinking about the politics of humanitarian aid, and this is something that comes up, came up in Sri Lanka, it goes all the way back, of course, to Rwanda and the delivery of aid to refugee camps that contains [general sidez](#), that then, kind of the failure to deal with that then led to the Rwanda invasion that led to the war in the DRC. So, some of those kind of fundamental lessons still kind of haven't been learned, or we learn them and then forget them. So, you know, we had Sri Lanka, then we had human rights up front. My own view, a bit like Ed's view, is that Ban Ki Moon is one of our more undervalued Secretary's General. But actually he was quite bold on a number of things. One things one things he was bold on was his support for R2P. Another thing was human rights up front. But human rights up front has been quietly, and sometimes not so quietly, just sidelined. So it's human rights left behind. Now its more like the the agenda. So it's sometimes you learn the lesson and then you forget the lesson. You have to go and relearn it again. And I think Syria was an example of that.

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Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 34:50

I was just thinking, you know, you took the words out of my mouth on Ban Ki Moon, because when you made the point earlier about Ed pushing that report on the third pillar, I just feel like something like that would receive so much resistance from the Secretariat at this stage of like, oh, that's too political, it's too risky. I just don't think there's that kind of bravery right now. So in, you know, this idea of of a regime that's wedded to survival, you know, a lot of what you said about the humanitarian aid, as well as you know, the Assad regime and any negotiations for the future just brings up thoughts of a lot of the crises we see today from, you know, Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia, and others. You know, in a world where geopolitical competition is very high, but also authoritarianism is rising, and we're seeing more of these governments that will be at some point wedded to survival and shrinking, you know, civic space, what role do you see for R2P right now?

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Alexander Bellamy 36:04

Yes, I think, like you say, the the geopolitical pendulum has swung firmly against not just R2P, but every human rights agenda at the UN you know, it's that we work on R2P so it's easy to kind of just focus on that, but we need to bear in mind that this swinging, it's challenging everything, the entire human rights agenda and WPS as well. And the driver of that, as you say, is this rise of authoritarianism, this rise of this kind of authoritarian populism. So what's the role of R2P? Well, firstly, it matters that we continue to use the language that states who are committed to the principle remain committed to the principle, and that even acknowledging a time of constraint, as you said, that we remain brave and having difficult conversations and trying to explore options that are available so that we don't kind of abandon the field, if you like, that the conversations keep happening, that we keep trying to do what we can, acknowledging that there are more difficult constraints at the time, and that, you know, the Council is blocked. So let's look at, you know, what you can do with the GA, what you can do with the Human Rights Council, also reinvigorating a debate about regional organizations, putting this back on the on the hands of regional organizations, saying, well, you know, is this what you where you want your region to go, or, you know, what are the pathways? So that's the first thing, is recognizing at some point that pendulum will swing back again. At some point the populism is going to run its course. It's seeming popular now because we've had the washout of the GFC, COVID. The idea of liberal democracy seems unfashionable because a lot of people are going, well, liberal democracy didn't actually make our lives better. Actually, living standards are going down, and so people turn to populism because they're angry at the failure of liberal democracy. But populism also doesn't have any of the answers, so people are going to get to that. So you're already getting in places that kind of came to populism first, like Turkey, for example, you're seeing now you know, they were one of one of the first to move from kind of democracy to a form of authoritarian populism, and now they're moving back again. You know, people are now protesting in greater numbers against Erdogan, going well, actually, this hasn't made our lives better. It's just brought cronyism and corruption and economic collapse. And because populism doesn't have the answers, because ultimately, it is kind of, you know, political snake oil. So you're going to see this swing back kind of everywhere at some point. And that's where keeping these principles alive is really important, because then it means that as the politics shifts, you've got the frameworks, you've got the language, you've got the basis for consensus and cooperation. You've got some of the tools that are kind of ready to go. So if you like, you won't have to invent it from scratch, as people did at the start of the of the century, because you've had this period. And also the principles and tools will be

sharpened by the geopolitical challenges, by the failures, by the difficulties of finding compromise. So I think will it will swing back, and what's important is, then, that your institutions are kind of robust enough to be able to pick up the challenge when the when they're called for again, people will come back to the Security Council, they will want the UN to be doing more. The question is, then, is the UN fit for purpose? That, for me, is where the UN should be focusing its reform. My worry is that what the UN is doing is kind of broadening and thinning. So it's when it needs to be kind of narrowing and deepening. It needs to be understanding that there are fewer things that it can get good purchase on than a couple of decades ago, but it needs to make sure that it is better able to get purchase on those things. So I, you know again, to come back to Ed. So Ed's favorite UN Secretary General is the one that everyone forgets, who is Javier Perez de Cuellar. And Ed thought he was the best Secretary General because he was operating in probably the most difficult geopolitical period. But Ed's measure was, how does the Secretary General leave the office of the Secretary General? Does he leave the office stronger or weaker than he found it? And Ed argued that even given the difficulties of late stage Cold War politics, the office of Secretary General was much stronger at the end of de Cuellar's tenure than it was at the beginning. de Cuellar picked it up from Kurt Waldheim, and it's not harder to get weaker than the Secretary General on the ship of an ex Nazi, but it was de Cuellar he argued, he's kind of set the way for a stronger Secretary Generalship in the post Cold War era. And that's, I think, what we should be looking for right now from UN leadership. Are you leaving those institutions stronger or weaker than they were when you when you found them.

J Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 41:46

That a really big question at the moment with the UN 80 initiative, I think, so it will be interesting to see how that plays out as we also move forward towards the next, you know, the process of picking the next Secretary General.

A

Alexander Bellamy 42:02

Yeah and I think could come back what you were saying about the difficult conversations. My worry is that by avoiding those difficult conversations, by broadening everything out, you hold a degree of consensus, but nobody thinks the UN is the institution that you would turn to for solutions anymore. It becomes just a place where you just work on language that isn't really going to commit anyone to anything, but isn't going to challenge anyone, that isn't going to push anyone to do anything that they wouldn't ordinarily do. So you have this impressive sounding consensus, but it's not actually consensus to do anything. It's been a good example is, I think, is how successive iterations of the development goals have both kind of broadened those goals, but also weaken their import, like so there's more goals than they used to be, but there's a less clear expectation that these goals demand that states do certain things. And the whole point of the SDGs at the very beginning was to have a narrow set of goals that were actionable, that you could hold states accountable for. And it seems to be that that's kind of happening across the board, particularly in the peace and security domain of the UN that you're getting a kind of a broadening. And Ed used to call this, you know, the classic you used whenever you write something for the UN everything has to become everything. And he said of his own reports that, you know, you would start with a report, it would go into the system, and you'd have to add in paragraphs on everything. But you hope that there's a kind of a kernel still there, of the of the original. And you see that, I think, particularly at the moment, as the I think the leadership has lost something of its kind of moral bearings, lost something of a kind of a sense of direction. And that's kind of reflected then in some of the the ideas coming forward for the UN at 80.

J

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 43:57

Yeah, and it's, I feel it's unfortunate because for member states, there is this kind of consensus that then, in some ways, as you said, like makes the whole endeavor meaningless in many ways, or at least different initiatives, but then for the people of the world that the UN is meant to serve, like they still see some value in the UN and in what it's meant to do, but then that value is not being met for them.

A

Alexander Bellamy 44:32

Yeah, absolutely.

J

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 44:34

So as someone who's kind of deeply engaged in both scholarly and policy dimensions of atrocity prevention, you know, through your writing and through your work at the Asia Pacific Center, what advice would you give to the next generation of atrocity prevention scholars and practitioners?

A

Alexander Bellamy 44:55

Oh, that's a good question. Don't do what we did. No, no, I wouldn't say that. Yeah, I think -

J

Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 45:01

I mean, you can't have done anything that bad. My very first event at the UN was actually going to see you present a paper, and I'm still here now, more years later than I'd like to admit. So we're making some form of progress.

A

Alexander Bellamy 45:22

For me, my and I know I pivoted this all the time, but for people like yourself and people coming in new is to remember how much things have changed, one of the reasons why we feel so desperately sad that we are failing on so many fronts is because we expect more than we used to. If you look at right now, there's the overall level of armed conflict and atrocity crimes in the world. These aren't unprecedented levels. These are levels not all that dissimilar to the mid 1990s and still lower than for much of the Cold War. The number of conflicts, the lethality of conflicts and the lethality of atrocity crimes was still generally higher year on year in the Cold War than it is now. And where we are now is not massively different from where we were in the 90s. Even if we take it with Rwanda, is a massive vibration. If we take Rwanda out as an outlier in terms of scale, where we are now is about mid 1990s without Rwanda. In the mid 1990s we didn't have the sense that there was some great crisis of world order. In the mid 1990s, we're like, hey, world order's great Cold War is over. And yeah, there's a few civil wars that the UN is not doing a good job of dealing with. Now, with a similar level of violence, we have a sense of a great global crisis. Now that's partly, I think, because of the geopolitical fragmentation, but I think it's also partly because we expect more, we expect to be better able to prevent atrocity crimes and to protect populations. We think these things shouldn't be happening, whereas as recently as the 90s, we generally accepted that, you know, civil wars and atrocities were kind of like a fact of life. And yeah, we wish the UN could do better at dealing with them, but there wasn't the kind of the same sense of crisis. I think the other thing is partly the same. It was partly just the addendum to the first thing is, I think for scholars, we've now got 20 years of evidence, so that, I think too much of our study has either been at the theoretical level, or the level of individual cases, and I think particularly on individual cases we need, we need that, and we need more of that, and we need more fine grained analysis so that we can kind of understand where the sources of prevention and protection might be, and sometimes they might be in unusual places, and what outsiders can do to better support local sources of prevention and protection. But we also need an empirical assessment of the overall trajectory, that is to understand how and why things overall have changed. So I looked a little bit at this, I couldn't quite join the dots, but there are two sets of questions. One is about the overall trajectory of atrocity crimes, and the other is the overall trajectory of international responses. When you look at those two things, it's clear that from 2005 to today, we've gone through kind of three stages. The first was from 2005 till about 2012 where again, for you and I, we look back and we go, look, were we right when we were saying things like, things are getting better, there are fewer atrocity crimes, there's more international cooperation. Did we dream that up, or were we right? Well, actually, you go back and look at the data, and it was clearly right that from the mid 90s through to about 2012 you had a significant and sustained

decline in atrocity crimes and armed conflict. Now that decline starts before R2P. So interestingly, R2P itself is a product of whatever was changing in world politics to bring about that decline, right? So you have a peak in the 90s and then a decline, and clearly states are saying, we need the international community to do better at preventing these crimes and responding to it, and R2P is a product of that. And R2P, 2005 happens around about the middle of that decline, but it's sustained till about 2012. Meanwhile, if you look at those first few years of R2P, after 2005, not very much is happening. You know, your fantastic Global Centre has done a brilliant job at collecting all those resolutions, which you know I'm forever using your datasets on this. And in those first few years, yeah, there's a couple of general Security Council nods in the direction of R2P, but not much in the way of the Council using R2P in relation to specific cases. Then something happens in 2012, we all know what happens in 2012, 2011 and 2012, it's the Arab Spring, right? You have half a dozen crises kick on in the Middle East. You've also had the global financial crisis a couple of years earlier. So there's a few places outside the Middle East where you see increasing instability as well, which has to have been associated with the GFC, where you've had the sharp downturns in living standards or sharp escalations and things like the price of bread, for example, that's going to put pressure on social fabric. But what you see from 2012 to about 2016 is the international community actually turning to R2P to deal with an increasing number of atrocity related crises. So you get an uptick of the number of crises, but you also get an uptick in the number of cases where the Security Council in particular is explicitly referring to R2P. So it goes from no cases, to at its peak, I think there are nine different country situations where the Council's resolutions specifically identify and refer to R2P and get the peak, I think it's nine, I think we're back down to three now. And then something happens around 2016, 2017 in that the number, for a while, the number of, kind of increasing atrocities, peaks. So it's kind of like as if the international community is struggling with this escalation. It's using R2P, and it's able, for a while to get a kind of a handle on the escalation, and the escalation kind of peters off, but then it kicks off again after after 2016 and the other thing that happens after 2016 is the number of country situations where the council is referring to R2P diminishes. So it's almost as if you have a period where the international community is grappling with R2P and trying to respond, and then something happens, and it fades away. Now what? So the question then becomes, what's going on in that latter stage? Now, one of the things, one of the explanations that lots and lots of academics come up with is it's all to do with Libya. This was the turn away from R2P. But if you look at the timeline, it's clearly not to do with Libya, because the turn away from R2P doesn't happen until 2016, 2017. Doesn't happen after Libya. In fact, the point I always, you've heard me say this loads of times on Libya, not only did Libya not make the Security Council walk away from R2P. Because actually, after Libya, the council refers to R2P in relation to more cases than it had done before Libya. The intervention Libya doesn't even make the council walk away from R2P on Libya, that is, there are two resolutions on Libya after the intervention that reference R2P. So whatever's going on, it's not Libya. So then you look at the timeline, well, what else is going on around this time? And what, of course, is going on around 2016, 2017, is Trump won. So one hypothesis, and I haven't tested, is does that shift, kind of, in a sense, undermine, you've no longer got the US with the Europeans pushing for for Security Council to include R2P, and we know the Council is kind of a Council of habit, right? So if the P1 is no longer pushing for it, it just doesn't get added in. And the more it doesn't get added in, the more it just gets overlooked. And so you get this, this steady decline. But one of the interesting things with the decline is it's not been a kind of a willful, wholesale decline, that you still have three cases where the council still routinely refers to R2P. So it's not as if the Council has, at some point said, we're not doing R2P anymore. Let's get rid of R2P, because it's still there. It's just that Council politics has produced a declining number. Now one of the reasons for that decline is, of course, some of those cases that we're referencing, the R2P was referenced in relation to are no longer on the Council's agenda. So it's not even as if, in some of those cases, the Council has said we're not doing R2P

on that case anymore. It's simply that the case doesn't come up. So that's a long winded way of saying that we can tell this story of these two sets of things going on, and one thing that I've completely left out of that story is the regional level. But as you can also tell a kind of a parallel third story about what's going on in different regions, which is equally as complex, and in some regions, involves kind of moments of greater cooperation and a fragmenting of cooperation. And I think we've got to get a better handle on understanding what's been going on, why these changes have been happening, and realizing that sometimes these changes happen for reasons entirely unconnected with R2P, that R2P is just one small subset of international politics, and it is very much subject to the kind of the headwinds of international politics, and those headwinds of international politics are very much caused by the headwinds of domestic politics. Ultimately, it matters for R2P, which way Pennsylvania votes in a presidential election, for example. So I think we've got to get a kind of a better understanding of where we are, why we're here, in order to then think about well, how do you navigate what's likely to come in the future?



Jaclyn Streitfeld-Hall 56:05

Thank you for joining us for this episode of Expert Voices on Atrocity Prevention. If you enjoyed this episode, we encourage you to subscribe to the podcast on Apple Podcasts, SoundCloud or Spotify, and we'd be grateful if you left us a review for more information on the Global Centre's work on R2P, mass atrocity prevention, and populations at risk of mass atrocities, visit our website at www.globalr2p.org, and connect with us on Facebook, BlueSky or LinkedIn at GCR2P.