# Cuba and RtoP: A critical approach from a humanitarian anti-hegemonic Global South powerbroker

Carlos Alzugaray Treto

In his most recent book on the concept of "responsibility to protect", one of the world's leading experts on the issue, Alex Bellamy, has characterized the Cuban position as part of "a tiny handful of doctrinaire states" who do it "for ideological reasons (it suits the anti-imperialist rhetoric of Venezuela and Cuba, for instance)"(Bellamy, 2014: 4 & 12).

In the present paper I will attempt to deconstruct this narrative that paints Cuba in the worst possible light. I will argue that the position of Havana can better be explained on the basis of the general characterization of its foreign policy as having the following main features:

> As a significant member of the Global South, which takes into account not only its narrow national interests and preferences, but also the interests of the Non-Aligned countries of the so-called Third World.

As an anti-hegemonic actor that opposes the domination of the world order by a sole superpower or a small combination of powers who claim to have a monopolistic, morally based set of values and norms that must be applied by and to the rest of the international community. This conception of a main principle of Cuban foreign policy is deeply embedded in the political culture of Cuba as the result of bitter historical experiences.

As a State that has incorporated into its international practice the best legacies of humanitarianism, demonstrated by its contribution to the ending of apartheid and colonialism in Africa, to South-South Cooperation and to the common toil against natural disasters.

As a small but significant powerbroker who has been ready to build bridges and contribute to the solution of major conflicts and crisis involving threats to large populations.

Cuba's historical experience has made it a victim and/or potential victim of genocidal policies carried out by great powers, who have used coercion and threats to impose their will on Cuban society with terrible consequences for its people, mostly using humanitarian excuses for their attitudes. Many authors, including Bellamy, contend that one of the historical sources of RtoP lie in the United States involvement in Cuba's War of Independence in 1898, misinterpreting the real sources of that unilateral self-interested intervention and underestimating the negative consequences it had for the Cuban nation. See for example the essay by Mike Sewell, titled "Humanitarian intervention, democracy, and imperialism: the American war with Spain, 1898, and after" in one of the most consulted works on humanitarian intervention, the concept that lies at the origin of "responsibility to protect" (Simms and Trim, 2011: 303-322).

Many authors, including Bellamy himself, have recognized that "responsibility to protect" was a development of the controversial concept of "humanitarian intervention" elaborated by the International Com-

mission on Humanitarian Intervention and Sovereignty, which failed dismally in attempting to undermine the main principle of international law (state sovereignty) in favor of the so-called "human security". That argument is present in works by Johnson (2014), Pattison (2010), Simms &Trimm (2011), and Weiss (2013).

As Noam Chomsky has shown, "virtually every use of force in international affairs has been justified in terms of RtoP, including the worst monsters" (Cunliffe, 2011: 11). Chomsky points out that historically, "Japan's 1931 attack on Manchuria, Mussolini's 1935 invasion of Ethiopia, and Hitler's occupation of parts of Czechoslovakia in 1938," were"all accompanied by lofty rhetoric about the solemn responsibility to protect the suffering populations, and factual justifications"(Chomsky, 2011: 11).

I will also demonstrate that the Cuban position on RtoP has also been the object of an updating between 2005 and 2014. In 2005-2006 and to a certain extent in July, 2009, at the Plenary Meeting of the 63rd Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations regarding the report of the Secretary General A163167 "Implementing the Responsibility to Protect", Cuba's position was radical, criticizing not only the concept but also the general tendencies of global governance present at the time, when the Bush administration was carrying out what some authors have characterized as "America Unbound" (Daalder and Lindsay, 2003).

The Cuban position on the issue was manifested for the first time in the Non Aligned Movement Statement on Responsibility to Protect delivered by Malaysia to the United Nations in April 2005 (Non Aligned Movement, 2005: 1):

> "On the intended concepts of 'responsibility to protect' and 'human security', Cuba's position has not changed. In the present world's condition they would only facilitate interference, pressures and intervention in the internal affairs of our States by the big powers, in overt and constant threat to our peoples' right to self-determination. Cuba reiterates its firm repudiation to the attempt of approval of these concepts, which only serve the interest of those who make millionaire profits with wars. Lately, there has been a trend to designate the so-called 'failed

> states', whose political instability could put the security of the rich and powerful at risk, and which would have to be applied the naive recipe of 'responsibility to protect' and respect for 'human security'. These so-called 'failed states' appear on a list recently published by a well-known magazine on international politics, where 60 of us, including some that will be surprised for being included in such an exclusive group, appear as threats according to 12 arbitrarily manipulated indicators" (Non-Aligned Movement, 2005: 1).

Three aspects of the above statement should be commented in the framework of the present article. In the first place the reference to the conditions existing at the time in world politics, a context in which, in Cuba's view, the acceptance of the idea of "responsibility to protect" could only serve to"facilitate interference, pressures and intervention in the internal affairs of our States by the big powers, in overt and constant threat to our peoples' right to self-determination."

In 2005, the American war in Iraq had been going on already for two years. The way that the war was unleashed and conducted proved the point that Cuba was making. The United States acted unilaterally without approval from the United Nations Security Council and alleging, among other things, the human rights violations of which the Saddam regime was responsible.The war in Iraq was not only justified under false pretenses, but also caused enormous human suffering. (Chomsky and Achcar, 2007: 83-122).

Cuba felt threatened when the George W. Bush administration insinuated that Havana would be in a category of countries very similar to the Axis of Evil. In 2003, the same year that the U.S. launched the invasion of Iraq, Washington created a *Commission for the Assistance to a Free Cuba*, presided over by Colin Powell. The following year, Assistant Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security Affairs, John R. Bolton, falsely accused Cuba of maintaining a biological weapons program, an accusation very similar to the one made against Iraq. And in 2006 Bush created the position of Coordinator for a Cuban Transition in the State Department.

The latter step seemed to be designed to have already in place an official that would play in Cuba the same role that General Jay Gardner

did in Iraq during the initial stage of the military occupation. If there was any doubt, Bob Woodward's third installment of his **Bush at War** trilogy in 2006 confirmed that at the White House the President and some of his advisers had towards Havana a similar mindset that led to the invasion of Iraq. The following dialog was included in Woodward's book when Gardner returned from Baghdad and was invited to the Oval Office to pay his respects to the President:

> "As Garner got up to leave, (Condoleezza) Rice stopped him and extended her hand. 'Jay, you've got to stay in touch with us,' she said.
>
> "'I'd like to,' Garner said, thinking to himself, *How the hell am I going to do that?* After all, he only talked with Rumsfeld.
>
> "On the way out, Bush slapped Garner on the back. "Hey, Jay, you want to do Iran?
>
> "'Sir, the boys and I talked about that and we want to hold out for Cuba. We think the rum and cigars are a little better . . . The women are prettier.
>
> "Bush laughed. 'You got it. You got Cuba"' (Woodward, 2006: 224).

As shown, what Bellamy calls the ideological anti-imperialist rhetoric of Cuba was really a practical conclusion from the available evidence: the country could be invaded alleging any excuse and the "responsibility to protect" could be the perfect alibi with the right manipulation of the information.

The second point raised by the Cuban statement was precisely related to the issue of media control and manipulation. By pointing out that an influential foreign policy journal had drawn a list of 60 failed states, mostly from the Global South, public opinion could be maneuvered into accepting military intervention, in violation of sovereignty, under the pretext of humanitarian action.

Cuban historical experience pointed in that direction. Most historians of the Spanish-Cuban-American War of 1898 coincide in pointing

out that the American intervention in Cuba's War of Independence (1895-1898) was made possible because the advancement of this clearly imperialist project was masked under the shroud of what was seen then as a responsibility to protect the small countries of the Caribbean, and in that way, turn public opinion in favor of a war that was not considered initially necessary. Cuban-American scholar Louis A. Pérez Jr. has argued:

> "Central to the proposition of the American imperial project was precisely the notion of duty: the necessity to discharge a higher moral obligation mandated by providential design for the greater good of humanity"(Perez, 2008: 264).

The last point raised by the Cuban statement was more implicit than explicit. It was the questioning of the proposition that an idea like the "responsibility to protect" could be effectively implemented in an international system in which the asymmetries of power give broad possibilities of action to large Nation-States which, in general, determine the course of events. And this idea is neither really new nor doctrinaire. As political philosophers have emphasized over time, the old dictum that "it is the law of nature that the strong do what they can and that the weak do what they must" is very much the standard procedure of power politics (Ryan, 2012: 24).

This reality of world politics was clearly demonstrated when the concept of "responsibility to protect" was presented in paragraphs 138 and 139 of the **2005 World Summit Outcome**. The circumstances of this decision and document approval have been controversial. There was no concrete and specific discussion of these paragraphs. They were included in a 40 page, 178-paragraph document that was adopted hastily under the pretext that the Millennium Summit had to be brought to a close. The Cuban delegation, headed by Ricardo Alarcón, complained about this decision, but the Venezuelan President, Hugo Chávez, formulated the strongest criticism.[1] As Cuban delegates have argued again and again in different United Nations reviews and debates, the approval of that document does not constitute necessarily the acceptance of the "responsibility to protect" as a new norm in international relations. For it to be so, it would require a concrete approval by the General Assembly of the United Nations.

It is paradoxical that in 2005 two events demonstrated Cuba's altruistic internationalist solidarity foreign policy. One was the sending of 2,400 physicians and health workers to Pakistan to help with the humanitarian crisis provoked by the Kashmir earthquake. The second one was the offer to send a similar amount of emergency assistant medical teams to New Orleans to help with the wake of the Katrina Hurricane. It could be argued that in this latter case the U.S. government demonstrated incapacity in assuming the "responsibility to protect" a large human group from a natural disaster.

In 2006, Cuba's position on the subject hardened. Inaugurating a meeting of Foreign Ministers of Non-Aligned countries in Havana in September, Vice-president Carlos Lage was radical in his criticism of "human security" and the "responsibility to protect" describing them as "concepts that hide the intention of violating sovereignty and mutilating Independence, of poor countries, of course, never of the powerful" (Lage, 2006).

From that early beginning, Cuban officials have been making important contributions to the debate on "responsibility to protect", as shown in the above-mentioned contribution of 2009 and in positions explained by the Cuban Mission to the United Nations in 2012, 2013 and 2014. The following paragraphs will highlight the questions raised by Cuba in documents supplied to the author by the Cuban Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MINREX) listed in the sources below.

At the Plenary Meeting of the 63rd Session of the General Assembly, on July 23, 2009, discussing the report of the Secretary General (A1631677), the First Secretary of the Cuban Mission, Anet PinoRivero, began by pointing out the obvious: "The notion of responsibility to protect does not exist as a legal obligation provided in any instrument of the International Law or in the Charter of the United Nations" (Cuban Mission to the UN, 2009: 1).

She immediately raised the main objection of Cuba to the concept in the following terms:

> "Although we recognize the responsibility of each State to promote and protect all the human rights of its people, we are concerned about the proliferation of ambiguous and similar

> terms that, under an indiscriminate humanitarian image,entail in practice a violation of the principle of sovereignty of States, and in general of the Charter of the United Nations and the International Law. The so call 'humanitarian intervention' as well as the ancient 'temporary interposition' from the beginning of XX century should be remembered" (Cuban Mission to the UN, 2009: 1).

Reaffirming that "Sovereignty" lies as the cornerstone of the international system as on of the main principles contained in the Charter of the United Nations, the Cuban delegate went on to state: "Without it, there could be no United Nations and the small countries of the Southwould be abandoned at the mercy of the large and strong ones" (Cuban Mission to the UN, 2009: 1).

Challenging the idea that a new concept was required to make the United Nations more effective in cases of humanitarian crises, Ms. Pino argued:

> "Claiming the principle of Sovereignty has hindered the actions of the United Nationsto come to the aid of suffering humanity is to distort the truth. The inefficiency of the Organization is sometimes caused by, inter alia, the lack of political will, selectivity and double standards, development resources constraints, and dysfunction in the working of some of its bodies as the Security Council" (Cuban Mission to the UN, 2009: 1).

The Cuban delegate pointed out a clear procedural precedent, namely that issues of humanitarian character are in the purview of the General Assembly and its Economic and Social Council and not in the Security Council, whose composition and activities have been challenged anyway. Assigning to the Security Council the attribute of deciding on humanitarian crises, which is what the concept of "responsibility to protect" entails, would be a significant modification of the spirit and the letter of the Charter, a step that cannot be accomplished without a broad and profound debate at the General Assembly.

Cuba repudiates genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity, but believes that the General Assembly is the proper

forum to deeply analyze and take decisions on them. Only through that procedure can the United Nations approach these issues in a legitimate and consensual manner (Cuban Mission to the UN, 2009: 1-2).

The Cuban delegate then went on to raise some questions, among them the following:

> Who is to decide if there is an urgent need for an intervention in a given State, according to what criteria, in what framework, and on the basis of what conditions?
>
> Who decides it is evident the authorities of a State do not protect their people, and how is it decided?
>
> Who determines peaceful means are not adequate in a certain situation, and on what criteria?
>
> Do small States have also the right and the actual prospect of interfering in the affairs of larger States?
>
> Would any developed country allow, either in principle or in practice, humanitarian intervention in its own territory?
>
> How and where do we draw the line between an intervention under the "Responsibility to Protect" and an intervention for political or strategic purposes, and when do political considerations prevail over humanitarian conditions?
>
> How can we believe the 'good faith' of the powers which wage wars of aggression against othernations?
>
> Is saving an ethnic group from an ethnic cleansing by killing the other party, legal and ethical?
>
> When do foreign forces of occupation withdraw?
>
> When does the violation of the sovereignty of a countrycease? (Cuban Mission to the UN, 2009: 3).

Cuba also pointed out the following evident fact: "The language agreed at the 2005 World Summit on the responsibility to protect did not turn said term into a concept or a standard of law."At the same time, Ms. Pino underlined the ambiguity of the term and the questions it raised, proposing a two step approach to consider and adopt it: "First, we should provide a joint answer to its legal loopholes, and then review

the viability of the concept if theMember States so consider" (Cuban Mission to the UN, 2009: 3).

On 12 July 2011, Ambassador Rodolfo Benítez Verson, Cuban Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations participated in the interactive debate on the responsibility to protect at the Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly. Once more, the Cuban delegation objected to the attempts at implementing the concept "even before it is clearly defined and agreed on by the General Assembly. The debates on this matter held in recent years by the General Assembly and the procedural resolution adopted in 2009 have clearly revealed the diversity of positions."

Ambassador Benítez reminded the General Assembly the legal issues raised by Cuba in 2009 and went on to state: "It is obvious there is still a long road ahead in order to achieve a consensus on this matter. The General Assembly must continue to be the center of future discussions. The other bodies of the system, including the Security Council and the Secretariat, must refrain from taking steps on their own in this regard."

Once more, he pointed out the main risk in giving to the Security Council such an interventionist instrument: "There is a real danger that the Responsibility to Protect may end up being manipulated by covered interventionists seeking to justify in different manners interference and the use of force.History has repeatedly shown us examples of wars of conquest waged with thepretext of protecting civilians."

The examples that the Cuban delegate pointed out were evident in the cases of Iraq and Afghanistan, but especially in Libya:

> "Over one million innocent civilians in Iraq and more than 70 thousand in Afghanistan have died as a result of these actions. Civilian deaths in these wars account for over 90% of the casualties. The proportion of children in this data is horrendous and unprecedented. Undoubtedly, the concept of Responsibility to Protect can be easily manipulated; suffice it to observe the current situation in Libya.Without exhausting all diplomatic instruments, and without even trying to use peaceful means, at present NATO is unjustifiably using its most state-of-the-art and lethal armaments in Libya. The

> bombing by the Alliance kills the very civilians they are supposed to protect."

He also recalled another issue raised by Cuba before, the question of double standards:

> "Selectivity and double-standards prevailing today only reinforce our concerns on the Responsibility to Protect. While NATO attacks Libya, the Security Council abandons its responsibilities and remains indifferent to the constant aggression and the mass atrocities in the occupied Palestinian Territories.It is evident that, by maintaining its current composition and working methods, theSecurity Council can in no way ensure a non-abusive and non-selective action when implementing the Responsibility to Protect."

He ended by summarizing the essence of the Cuban position in the following paragraphs:

> "The principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference in the internal affairs of States, must be upheld at all cost, for without them, the United Nations cannot survive, and small and weak nations would be left at the mercy of larger and stronger nations.
>
> "Cuba opposes, and will categorically oppose, any use of force that is not included in the provisions of the Charter, for which there can be no justification. A more primitive one, based on the reinterpretation of the Charter and the International Law, cannot succeed the current unjust and deeply unequal global order" (Cuban Mission to the UN, 2011).

The final document that reflects Havana's position on this purported new international norm is the Official Statement of the of the Delegation of Cuba at the Interactive Dialogue on Responsibility to Protect as presented at the General Assembly Plenary Session of 8 September 2014 (Ministerio de RelacionesExteriores, 2014). On this occasion the Cuban delegation chose to begin with an unprecedented sharp declaration: "Cuba reaffirms its strong condemnation of the crimes denounced by the 2005 Summit (Paragraphs 138 and 139): genocide,

war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity, anywhere that they might happen or in any of its manifestations."

However, Cuba reiterated its opinion that "there is no clearly negotiated or consensual intergovernmental agreement by the Member States on the scope, implications and possible forms of implementation of the concept 'responsibility to protect'." Therefore, in the opinion of Havana, until that happens, it is not possible to invoke it in any kind of military actions by single or multiple actors.

In the present world context, according to Cuba, there are not objective or subjective conditions that would prevent the use by major powers of "responsibility to protect" as a pretext to interfere in the internal affairs of smaller states or for the use of force and military intervention with hegemonic pretenses. The document subject to the debate (A/68/947–S/2014/449) does not solve some very important legal issues that would guarantee objectivity, impartiality and non-selectivity in its application.

The Cuban delegation insisted in its previous demand for a broad, honest, inclusive and transparent debate on this issue at the General Assembly and on the defense of the position that "the responsibility to protect" concept should be based in the express recognition of sovereignty, self-determination, independence, territorial integrity and non-interference in the domestic affairs of Nation States. That is the only way in which small nations with limited resources can be protected from the free action of more powerful states.

## Conclusion

Far from been doctrinaire and ideologically motivated, the Cuban position on the "responsibility to protect" concept is solidly based in legal, historical and political considerations associated with its historical experience and traditional anti-hegemonic foreign policy. It also represents a valid criticism from the Global South.

The risks of implementing the "responsibility to protect" are evident in the last 10 years, Libya been the example that reflects what can

happen if its use is left to the powerful countries that have been trying to impose an hegemonic order in the world which can have only one result: the same kind of humanitarian crises and crimes that it is supposedly designed to prevent.

In the period object of this analysis, Cuba has demonstrated that it is an active member of the international community with humanitarian concerns and with a humanitarian practice that is rarely seen in countries with similarly limited resources. Examples abound: Havana has cooperated, even with big nations like the United States, in solving humanitarian disaster in countries like Pakistan, Haiti, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea. At the same time it has promoted the proclamation of Latin America and the Caribbean as a Zone of Peace at the Summit of the Latin American and Caribbean Community of States in Havana in January 2014. Finally, it is actively cooperating with Norway in mediating a peace agreement that will end the long conflict in Colombia, which has caused much human suffering.

One important concluding point is that Cuba has not shied away from been an active participant in the debates on the subject and has been constantly renovating its position, demonstrating once more the main trait that has emerged from the conduct of its foreign police in the last ten years, its constant updating. In the last debate on "responsibility to protect", while Havana recognized the importance of condemning and addressing the crimes described in paragraphs 138 and 139 of the **2005 World Summit Outcome** document, it underlined the main risk in not having a broad, honest, transparent and profound debate on the issue at the General Assembly.

That continuous updating of Cuba's position on "responsibility to protect" will undoubtedly be reinforced with the new stage opened by Presidents Raúl Castro and Barack Obama on 17 December 2014. On that occasion, both leaders emphasized that they will search for ways to cooperate in multilateral organizations on the basis of mutual respect for their differences. That is a positive development.

## NOTES

1 See Cumbre de la ONU y su declaración final defraudaron al mundo, http://www.ain.cu/2005/septiembre/sep16iggonu05.htm

## REFERENCES

Bellamy, Alex J. (2014). *Responsibility to Protect: A Defense*,Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

Chomsky, Noah (2011). "The skeleton in the closet: The responsibility to protect in history" in Cunliffe, infra.

Chomsky, Noah, and Gilbert Achcar (2006). *Perilous Power: the Middle East and U.S. Foreign Policy, Dialogues on Terror, Democracy, War, and Justice*, Boulder: Paradigm Publishers.

Cuban Mission to the UN (2009). *Statement by First Secretary, AnetPino-Rivero, Representative of Cuba, at the Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly 63rd Session, Regarding the Report of the Secretary-General A1631677 "Implementing the Responsibility to Protect"*, New York: 23 July, 2009. Document supplied to the author by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Havana.

Cuban Mission to the UN (2011). *Statement by Ambassador Rodolfo BenítezVerson, Deputy Permanent Representative of Cuba and Charge Affairs a.i. at the General Assembly Interactive Debate on the Responsibility to Protect*, New York: Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly 12 July 2011. Document provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Havana.

Cunliffe, Philip, editor (2011). *Critical Perspectives on the Responsibility to Protect: Interrogating Theory and Practice*, Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition.

Daalder, Ivo H. and James M. Lindsay (2003). *America Unbound: The Bush Revolution in Foreign Policy*, Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press.

Johnson, James Turner (2014). *Sovereignty: Moral and Historical Perspectives*, Georgetown University Press. Kindle Edition.

Lage, Carlos (2006). *Discurso del Vicepresidente del Consejo de Estado de la República de Cuba Carlos Lage Dávila, en la Inauguración de la Reunión de Cancilleres del Movimiento de Países No Alineados*, en *Granma* 9 de septiembre del 2006, página 2.

Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores (2014). *Intervención de la delegación de Cuba, en el diálogo interactivo sobre "Responsabilidad de Proteger"*. Nueva York: 8 deseptiembre de 2014. Document provided by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Havana.

Non-Aligned Movement (2005). *Some Developing Country Statements on the Responsibility to Protect*, delivered duringmeetings on UN Reform held in New York in April 2005. Document downloaded from Internet.

Pattison, James (2010). *Responsibility to Protect Who Should Intervene?* Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition.

Pérez Jr., Louis A. (2008). *Cuba in the American Imagination: Metaphor and the Imperial Ethos*, University of North Carolina Press, Kindle Edition.

Ryan, Alan (2012). *On Politics: A History of Political Thought: From Herodotus to the Present*, Norton. Kindle Edition.

Simms, Brendan and D. J. B. Trim (2011). *Humanitarian Intervention: A History.* Cambridge University Press. Kindle Edition.

United Nations General Assembly (2005). *2005 World Summit Outcome*, Resolution A/60/L.1, http://responsibilitytoprotect.org/world%20summit%20outcome%20doc%202005(1).pdf.

Weiss, Thomas G. (2013). *Humanitarian Intervention: Ideas in Action*,Wiley. Kindle Edition.

Woodward, Bob (2006). *State of Denial: Bush at War, Part III*, New York: Simon and Schuster.