Beyond Intervention: Differentiated R2P Operationalization in Three African Cases

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Abstract. This paper aims to answer how the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) moves from normative commitment to operational practice. Existing scholarship has examined R2P's normative development, contestation, selectivity, and relationship with humanitarian intervention and civilian protection, but less attention has been paid to comparative variation in the institutional configurations through which protection is operationalized. This article uses a structured comparison of Libya, South Sudan, and Mali to conceptualize differentiated operationalization. It identifies coercive protection in Libya, peacekeeping-based protection in South Sudan, and stabilization-oriented protection in Mali. The comparison shows that different configurations of political authorization, host-state consent, and institutional capacity constitute distinct protection architectures. Their characteristic dependency structure different implementation vulnerabilities: transition from coercive reaction to sustainable protection in Libya, dependence on operational cooperation and access in South Sudan, and the political sustainability of host-state consent in Mali. The article argues that R2P implementation is not merely uneven across crises; it is institutionally differentiated, and the arrangements that make protection possible also shape the conditions under which protection may become constrained.

Keywords: protection architecture; protection of civilians; peacekeeping; stabilization; consent; implementation vulnerability

Abstrak. *Paper ini bertujuan menjawab bagaimana Responsibility to Protect (R2P) bergerak dari komitmen normatif menuju praktik operasional? Literatur yang ada telah banyak membahas perkembangan normatif R2P, kontestasi, selektivitas, serta hubungannya dengan intervensi kemanusiaan dan perlindungan sipil, tetapi variasi komparatif dalam konfigurasi kelembagaan yang mengoperasionalkan perlindungan masih kurang mendapat perhatian. Artikel ini menggunakan perbandingan terstruktur atas Libya, Sudan Selatan, dan Mali untuk mengembangkan konsep operasionalisasi terdiferensiasi. Analisis mengidentifikasi perlindungan koersif di Libya, perlindungan berbasis penjaga perdamaian di Sudan Selatan, dan perlindungan berorientasi stabilisasi di Mali. Perbandingan menunjukkan bahwa konfigurasi berbeda dari otorisasi politik, persetujuan negara tuan rumah, dan kapasitas kelembagaan membentuk arsitektur perlindungan yang berbeda. Ketergantungan khas dari masing-masing arsitektur menstrukturkan kerentanan implementasi yang berbeda: transisi dari respons koersif menuju perlindungan berkelanjutan di Libya, ketergantungan pada kerja sama operasional dan akses di Sudan Selatan, serta keberlanjutan politik dari persetujuan negara tuan rumah di Mali. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa implementasi R2P tidak sekadar tidak merata antar-krisis, tetapi terdiferensiasi secara kelembagaan; pengaturan yang memungkinkan perlindungan juga membentuk kondisi yang dapat membatasi pelaksanaannya.*

Kata Kunci: *arsitektur perlindungan; perlindungan sipil; penjaga perdamaian; stabilisasi; persetujuan; kerentanan implementasi*

1. Introduction

The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) emerged from efforts to reconcile sovereign authority with the international responsibility to respond to populations threatened by mass atrocity crimes. At the 2005 World Summit, states agreed that each state bears the responsibility to protect its populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. They also affirmed an international responsibility to assist states in fulfilling that responsibility and declared their preparedness to take collective action, through the United Nations and in accordance with the Charter, when national authorities manifestly fail to protect their populations (United Nations General Assembly [UNGA], 2005). The Secretary-General subsequently organized these commitments into a three-pillar implementation strategy encompassing state responsibility, international assistance and capacity-building, and timely and decisive response (United Nations Secretary-General [UNSG], 2009).

Agreement on these responsibilities, however, does not determine how protection will be operationalized in particular crises. R2P does not possess its own military force, peacekeeping operation, humanitarian agency, sanctions mechanism, or administrative apparatus. Its implementation necessarily occurs through existing political and institutional arrangements. Protection may consequently involve diplomacy, mediation, assistance, sanctions, international criminal accountability, peace operations, civilian-protection mandates, coercive military measures, or combinations of these instruments (UNSG, 2009). The institutional form of protection can therefore vary substantially even where international actors confront serious threats to civilian populations.

Much of the political controversy surrounding R2P has nevertheless centred on military intervention. The International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), which introduced the language of a "responsibility to protect," sought to reframe the divisive debate over humanitarian intervention by shifting attention from a claimed right of outsiders to intervene toward responsibilities owed to populations at risk (International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty [ICISS], 2001). The 2011 intervention in Libya subsequently became the most prominent test of R2P's coercive dimension and generated extensive debate over Security Council authorization, implementation, regime change, post-intervention responsibility, and the implications of Libya for subsequent international responses (Bellamy, 2015; Glanville, 2013; Kuperman, 2013).

R2P, however, cannot be reduced to humanitarian intervention. The agreement reached at the 2005 World Summit was narrower in substantive scope because it applies specifically to genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity, but broader in its repertoire because implementation encompasses prevention, assistance, peaceful measures, and, under specified conditions, collective action through the Security Council (UNGA, 2005; UNSG, 2009). Bellamy (2010) accordingly describes R2P not simply as a trigger for intervention but as a diplomatic tool and policy lens for organizing responses to mass atrocities. Welsh (2019) similarly conceptualizes R2P as a complex norm containing multiple prescriptions concerning state responsibility, international assistance, and collective response.

Scholarship has also moved beyond an exclusively intervention-centered understanding of R2P practice. Hunt and Bellamy (2011) explicitly examine how peace operations can contribute to operationalizing R2P. Williams (2016) explores the relationship among R2P, the Protection of Civilians (PoC), and UN peacekeeping, emphasizing substantial overlap without treating these frameworks as equivalent. Paris (2016) similarly highlights the blurred institutional boundaries between R2P and peacebuilding. These studies make it difficult to sustain the claim that R2P operationalization outside military intervention has been neglected altogether.

A narrower comparative problem nevertheless remains. Existing scholarship establishes that R2P can be implemented through multiple instruments and that its practice intersects with peacekeeping, PoC, peacebuilding, and other international protection activities. Less systematically explained are why operationalization takes institutionally different forms across protection crises and how those institutional configurations shape the vulnerabilities encountered during implementation. Identifying that peacekeeping, sanctions, military force, mediation, or stabilization can contribute to protection is not the same as explaining how these instruments become

organized into distinct institutional arrangements or what dependencies those arrangements create.

This article addresses that problem through the concept of differentiated operationalization. R2P operationalization is defined as the process through which normative commitments to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity are translated into political authorization, institutional mandates, operational instruments, and practices of international protection. Operationalization is differentiated when those commitments become embedded in institutionally different configurations of authority, sovereign relations, and operational capacity. The specific contribution is a joint, case-comparative analysis of these configurations and the implementation dependencies they generate. Within the scholarship reviewed here, the combined comparison of Libya, South Sudan, and Mali through this explicit architecture-to-vulnerability framework has not been established; this is a bounded claim about the study's analytical contribution, not a claim that non-military forms of R2P practice have never been studied.

To capture these configurations, the article introduces the concept of protection architecture, defined as the institutional configuration through which a protection commitment is authorized, related to sovereign authority, equipped with operational instruments, and sustained in practice. Protection architecture occupies an intermediate analytical level between normative commitment and individual protection activities. It directs attention not simply to whether international actors intervene or which instrument they employ, but to how political authorization, sovereign consent, and institutional capacity combine to make particular forms of protection possible.

The article examines this process through a structured comparison of Libya, South Sudan, and Mali. The three cases should not be treated as equivalent manifestations of R2P. Libya represents the clearest case of coercive R2P operationalization. The Security Council explicitly invoked the Libyan authorities' responsibility to protect the population and subsequently authorized coercive measures for civilian protection (United Nations Security Council [UNSC], 2011a, 2011b). South Sudan represents a different configuration in which protection became increasingly organized through a continuing UN peacekeeping operation with a robust PoC mandate (UNSC, 2011c, 2014). Mali is the most conceptually ambiguous case and is treated deliberately as a boundary case of R2P-related operationalization, in which civilian-protection responsibilities associated with serious atrocity risks became embedded within a broader multidimensional stabilization architecture (UNSC, 2013). Mali is included to test the framework at the boundary between R2P's atrocity-specific remit and the broader PoC and stabilization agendas, not because every activity performed by MINUSMA qualifies as R2P implementation. Its inclusion permits the study to assess whether the same analytical dimensions illuminate a case with a weaker explicit R2P nexus.

The central research question is how R2P-related protection commitments are operationalized through different institutional modes in Libya, South Sudan, and Mali, and how do the resulting protection architectures shape implementation vulnerabilities? Two subsidiary questions guide the comparison: How do framing and authorization, host-state consent, institutional instruments and capacity, and implementation trajectories combine to produce different modes of protection? What documented dependencies account for the characteristic vulnerabilities of coercive, peacekeeping-based, and stabilization-oriented protection?

The central argument is that different configurations of political authorization, sovereign consent, and institutional capacity produce distinct protection architectures. These architectures make particular forms of protection possible, while their characteristic dependencies structure where and how implementation becomes vulnerable over time. Three ideal-typical modes emerge from the comparison are coercive protection in Libya, peacekeeping-based protection in South Sudan, and stabilization-oriented protection in Mali. Their characteristic vulnerabilities are, respectively, transition vulnerability, operational-cooperation vulnerability, and consent-sustainability vulnerability.

The conceptual origins of R2P lie in the controversies surrounding humanitarian intervention during the 1990s. ICISS sought to reframe this debate by replacing the language of a “right to intervene” with a “responsibility to protect.” ICISS (2001) organized that responsibility around three components, such as the

responsibility to prevent, the responsibility to react, and the responsibility to rebuild.

The ICISS formulation is important to the intellectual development of R2P, but it should not be conflated with the principle subsequently agreed by states. The 2005 World Summit Outcome established a narrower substantive scope. Paragraphs 138 and 139 identify genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity and affirm both the state's primary protection responsibility and an international responsibility to assist and, where national authorities manifestly fail, to take collective action in accordance with the UN Charter (UNGA, 2005). The World Summit did not reproduce the ICISS prevent–react–rebuild framework in its entirety.

R2P scholarship has already established that implementation can extend beyond military intervention. Bellamy (2010) describes R2P as functioning as a diplomatic tool and policy lens. Hunt and Bellamy (2011) explicitly examine how UN peace operations can contribute to operationalizing R2P. Williams (2016) analyses the relationship between R2P, PoC, and UN peacekeeping, while Paris (2016) highlights the blurred boundary between R2P and peacebuilding. Welsh (2019) conceptualizes R2P as a complex norm containing multiple prescriptions whose application remains politically contested. The analytical gap addressed here is therefore not the existence of multiple instruments but the comparative explanation of variation among the institutional configurations through which protection is operationalized. Bellamy (2005, 2008) examined normative and political risks of humanitarian intervention, while Pattison (2010) addressed who should undertake protective action. These works help explain why a classification based only on the decision to intervene would be insufficient for the present comparison.

A list of instruments—sanctions, military force, peacekeeping, mediation, human-rights monitoring, humanitarian assistance—does not by itself explain how protection operates. The same instrument may function differently depending on its political authorization, relationship with the host state, institutional location, and available capacity. Conversely, different instruments may be combined within a single protection arrangement (Day & Hunt, 2022; Ribeiro & Pires, 2024). The relevant unit of comparison is therefore not the individual instrument alone, but the configuration through which instruments are authorized and organized.

This article defines R2P operationalization as the process through which normative commitment to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity is translated into political authorization, institutional mandates, operational instruments, and practices of international protection. Operationalization is therefore a process of translation rather than simple norm invocation (Quinton-Brown, 2023).

This definition extends, rather than replaces, established approaches. The Secretary-General's three pillars specify responsibility and broad categories of response (UNSG, 2009), while Hunt and Bellamy (2011) examine the contribution of peace operations and Williams (2016) distinguishes R2P from the wider protection-of-civilians agenda. Those approaches clarify normative commitments and available practices, but by themselves do not supply a common procedure for comparing how authorization, sovereign relations, capacities, and changing access combine within a particular response. The present operational definition therefore makes the institutional configuration, rather than the presence of an R2P label or a single instrument, the unit of comparison. It does not imply that prior scholarship lacked an understanding of non military operationalization.

Explicit R2P language may constitute evidence that political actors frame a crisis through the norm, but vocabulary is neither a necessary nor sufficient indicator of operationalization (Quinton-Brown, 2023). R2P vocabulary is consequently treated in this study as evidence of protection framing, not as an independent explanatory variable or predictor of operational mode. The focus on operationalization also distinguishes normative commitment from implementation capacity. A formal mandate may authorize action without guaranteeing personnel, access, logistics, or political support (Day & Hunt, 2022; Ribeiro & Pires, 2024).

Operationalization is differentiated when a common protection framework is translated into institutionally distinct forms of international practice. R2P does not contain a single predetermined operational mechanism. It operates through existing institutions whose authority, capacities, and relationships with states vary across

crises (Nuruzzaman, 2022; Quinton-Brown, 2023). The comparison identifies three ideal-typical modes consist of coercive protection, peacekeeping-based protection, and stabilization-oriented protection. These categories describe predominant configurations rather than pure or mutually exclusive types.

The central intermediate concept is protection architecture. The institutional configuration through which a protection commitment is authorized, related to sovereign authority, equipped with operational instruments, and sustained in practice. Protection architecture links the normative and operational levels of analysis and shifts attention from isolated instruments toward configurations of authority, sovereignty relations, capacity, and implementation.

Regional organizations and P5 politics remain important within this framework but are not additional dimensions. Regional actors may influence authorization, legitimacy, consent, and operational support; P5 politics shape Security Council authorization and continuing political support (Nuruzzaman, 2022; Ribeiro & Pires, 2024). Institutional instruments and capacity constitute the third comparative dimension, while the implementation trajectory constitutes the fourth. The predominant mode and its characteristic vulnerability are analytical outputs rather than additional input dimensions.

Consent is not a fixed dichotomy. The article distinguishes entry consent, operational cooperation, and continuing political consent. A host state may formally accept a mission while restricting movement, investigations, logistics, or other mandated activities. Deteriorating operational cooperation may later develop into withdrawal of consent for the mission itself, as the termination of MINUSMA illustrates (Carvalho et al., 2024). Conversely, coercive protection may proceed without incumbent-state consent where the Security Council authorizes action and external actors possess sufficient capacity (Nuruzzaman, 2022; Quinton-Brown, 2023). Consent is therefore an evolving political relationship whose operational significance depends on the architecture within which protection occurs.

Institutional capacity should not be treated as a single quantity. Coercive civilian protection may require military assets, intelligence, command structures, and capable external implementers. Peacekeeping-based protection may require sustained troop and police presence, bases, mobility, early-warning systems, human-rights monitoring, and humanitarian facilitation (Cormack & Pendle, 2024; Day & Hunt, 2022). Stabilization-oriented protection may require an even wider combination of military, political, human-rights, logistical, reconciliation, and state-support capacities (Carvalho et al., 2024). The relevant question is, therefore, capacity for what function, supplied by whom, under what political conditions, and at what stage of implementation?

Operational mode is best understood as the observable institutional expression of a wider protection architecture rather than as an independent explanatory variable. The mode describes how protection is predominantly organized; the architecture explains the configuration that makes that mode possible. A mode-specific vulnerability is a characteristic implementation pressure arising from the political and institutional dependencies of a particular protection architecture. Vulnerability is not equivalent to failure. It identifies a condition upon which implementation is particularly dependent and through which constraints may become consequential. The concept is deliberately non-deterministic. A coercive architecture may become vulnerable during transition; a peacekeeping architecture may become vulnerable where formal consent persists but operational cooperation deteriorates; and a stabilization architecture may become vulnerable where political consent sustaining the mission itself becomes contested (Carvalho et al., 2024; Day & Hunt, 2022).

The proposed analytical sequence is as follows: atrocity-protection concern and normative framing → political authorization and sovereign relationship → deployment of particular instruments and usable capacities → observed implementation trajectory → inferred location of vulnerability. The sequence is evaluated with documentary evidence rather than assumed to operate as an invariant causal law. The four dimensions describe the architecture; the protection mode summarizes its predominant form; vulnerability identifies its exposed dependency. These concepts therefore occupy different analytical roles rather than functioning as interchangeable labels.

A framework that moves beyond military intervention must preserve conceptual boundaries

between R2P and adjacent practices. R2P and PoC overlap but are not equivalent. R2P is substantively restricted to the four atrocity crimes, while PoC in UN peacekeeping encompasses a broader set of responsibilities toward civilians threatened by physical violence (Williams, 2016). Peacekeeping is an institutional instrument rather than a synonym for R2P; peace operations can contribute to operationalizing R2P without every peace operation thereby becoming an R2P operation (Hunt & Bellamy, 2011).

The boundary is especially important for stabilization. Stabilization missions may contain civilian-protection, human-rights, political, humanitarian-support, and state-support functions, but stabilization as such is not R2P. Accordingly, this article does not describe Mali as an "R2P stabilization" case. It treats Mali as a boundary case of R2P-related operationalization in which protection concerns became embedded within a wider stabilization architecture.

The framework begins with R2P's normative commitment to protect populations from atrocity crimes. That commitment does not prescribe a single form of action. It must be translated into practice through political framing and authorization (Quinton-Brown, 2023; Ribeiro & Pires, 2024). The relationship between the intervening actors and the host state then shapes the balance between consent and coercion. Together with the relationship between intervening actors and the host state, available institutional and operational capacities shape how protection is organized and implemented (Day & Hunt, 2022). As a mission is implemented, its political relationships, access, resources, and tasks may change, requiring adaptation over time. Each mode consequently has a characteristic point of vulnerability, such as the transition from coercive action to sustained protection, the maintenance of operational cooperation in peacekeeping, or the continued political consent on which a stabilization mission depends.

This sequence is analytical rather than mechanically causal. Feedback is possible in terms of implementation difficulties may reshape authorization, host-state obstruction may alter political support, and contested practices may affect legitimacy. The framework, therefore, makes a bounded claim that normative protection commitments are translated through political and institutional configurations. In addition, those configurations make particular forms of protection possible while creating characteristic dependencies through which implementation may become constrained.

2. Method

The article employs a structured, focused comparison of Libya, South Sudan, and Mali (George & Bennett, 2005). The comparison is structured because the same analytical questions are asked of each case and focused because the analysis concentrates on dimensions directly relevant to institutional operationalization. It is not intended to estimate the independent causal effect of a single variable or test universal propositions. The purpose is configurational, which identify how political authorization, sovereign consent, and institutional capacity combine into different protection architectures and to examine the characteristic implementation dependencies visible within those architectures.

The same four questions organize each case are how was the protection problem framed and politically authorized? What relationship existed between international action and sovereign authority, and how did it change? Through which institutions, instruments, and capacities was protection implemented? How did the architecture function over time, what constraints emerged, and what conditions affected continuation or transition?

The comparison applies four observable dimensions to each case. (1) Framing and authorization are identified from explicit atrocity-related language, Security Council resolutions, voting records, and authorized tasks. (2) Consent and coercion are assessed separately at entry, during day-to-day operational cooperation, and at the point of continued political acceptance or withdrawal. (3) Instruments and capacity are identified from the type of mandate and the operational resources it can actually employ, including external military force, UN field presence, patrols, reporting, and political or human-rights functions. (4) The implementation trajectory is traced through changes in mandates, access restrictions, institutional handovers, and termination. A classification is assigned only after these four dimensions have been described, and a vulnerability is inferred only when a documented dependency can be linked to an observed operational constraint or transition (George & Bennett, 2005; Day & Hunt, 2022).

The cases combine serious civilian-

protection risks and substantial Security Council involvement with significant variation in institutional organization. Libya provides the clearest coercive case. Resolution 1970 invoked the Libyan authorities' responsibility to protect, imposed sanctions, and referred the situation to the International Criminal Court, while Resolution 1973 authorized "all necessary measures" to protect civilians (UNSC, 2011a, 2011b). South Sudan provides a peacekeeping configuration. UNMISS was established in 2011 and reprioritized toward civilian protection in 2014 (UNSC, 2011c, 2014). Mali provides a boundary case in which MINUSMA combined civilian protection with stabilization, political transition, human-rights monitoring, humanitarian support, and state-support functions (UNSC, 2013). The selection strategy is, therefore, one of structured variation rather than a strict most-similar-systems design.

The selection is purposive rather than representative. All three cases exhibit documented civilian-protection concerns and substantial Security Council involvement, but they differ in their institutional response and degree of explicit R2P framing. Libya is the strong-nexus case because the Council explicitly invoked responsibility to protect; South Sudan is an intermediate, PoC-led peacekeeping case; and Mali is a deliberately difficult boundary case. Mali is analytically informative because Resolution 2100 (2013) combined physical civilian protection, human-rights monitoring, and stabilization amid grave protection risks, while the evidence does not justify labeling the entire MINUSMA mandate an R2P operation (UNSC, 2013; Williams, 2016). Inclusion therefore tests the framework's conceptual boundary instead of presuming that stabilization and R2P are synonymous.

A case is treated as relevant where three conditions are present. They are actual or credible risk relating to the four atrocity crimes, substantial international framing or authorization of protection directed toward populations exposed to those risks, and translation of those concerns into observable international practice. Explicit use of the term "Responsibility to Protect" strengthens evidence of normative framing but is not required in every document or phase. Conversely, PoC language alone does not automatically establish an R2P-related case. This threshold allows variation in the strength of the R2P connection itself to remain visible rather than assuming equivalence across the cases. These criteria establish relevance for comparative analysis, not a judicial finding that a particular crime was committed or an assertion that the UN designated every case an R2P mission. The mode of protection is not a fifth dimension; it is the ideal-typical classification derived from the configuration of the four dimensions specified above. Likewise, mode-specific vulnerability is not coded in advance as an outcome that must occur. It is an analytical inference derived from documented dependencies and implementation pressures.

The documentary source corpus represented in the reference list comprises 43 distinct entries. They are 24 official institutional documents (United Nations resolutions, meeting records and reports, an OHCHR investigation, and Brazil's formal UN letter) and 19 scholarly works. The official documents provide the primary evidence of mandates, votes, formal positions, operational restrictions, and mission transitions; scholarly works support interpretation of contested developments and conceptual distinctions. Security Council records also preserve host-government positions expressed in Council meetings. These are counts of cited source entries, not numbers of observations, incidents, interviewees, or a claim to have exhausted every document produced about the three crises. The study uses no interviews or newly collected field data.

The analysis distinguishes documentary claims, empirical implementation claims, and analytical claims. Documentary claims describe what an institution formally decided or stated, such as the civilian-protection authorization in Resolution 1973 (UNSC, 2011b) or MINUSMA's termination in Resolution 2690 (UNSC, 2023a). Empirical implementation claims concern reported practices and constraints, including restrictions on UNMISS movements (UNSG, 2016, 2021) and MINUSMA's ground and air access (UNSG, 2022b). Analytical claims interpret those records through structured comparison and the scholarship on peacekeeping and protection, without presenting conceptual labels as UN classifications (George & Bennett, 2005; Hunt & Bellamy, 2011; Day & Hunt, 2022). The labels coercive protection, peacekeeping-based protection, stabilization-oriented protection, transition vulnerability, operational-cooperation

vulnerability, and consent-sustainability vulnerability are categories developed by the analysis rather than terminology attributed to the United Nations.

The comparison proceeds in two stages. First, the analysis reconstructs the protection architecture within each case. Second, it compares the cases to identify systematic variation in their institutional dependencies. The framework does not assume that a protection mode determines whether an intervention succeeds or fails. Instead, it examines how political authorization, the relationship with the host state, and available capacity combine to form a protection architecture. That architecture enables particular protection activities while creating dependencies that must be sustained during implementation. Vulnerability arises where those dependencies come under pressure, such as a loss of operational access, insufficient resources, or declining political support. The analysis therefore identifies where implementation may become constrained, without treating that constraint as an inevitable outcome (Day & Hunt, 2022; Carvalho et al., 2024). This formulation is configurational rather than monocausal.

Within each case, evidence is ordered chronologically from initial authorization and deployment to subsequent adaptation, operational constraint, or termination. Each proposed vulnerability is traced by matching a formal source of authority to a capacity or cooperation requirement and then to a documented pressure on that requirement. Cross-case synthesis compares these chains rather than treating the counts of access violations as directly comparable outcome measures. A single reported constraint is not interpreted as proving overall mission failure, and the evidence does not identify a unique causal effect of one dimension.

Nevertheless, this analysis has several limitations. First, the study examines variation within operationalization rather than selection into operationalization. Second, the cases vary in the strength of their connection to explicit R2P discourse, especially Mali. Third, the modes are ideal types which real operations contain overlapping instruments and evolve over time. The study does not rank the modes or determine which is generally more effective. Fourth, the cited source corpus is selective and document-based, limiting claims about undocumented experiences of affected civilians. Fifth, the three-case design supports concept development rather than statistical generalization or a causal assessment of which architecture protects more people.

3. Result and Discussion

The findings are presented in five parts. The Libya, South Sudan, and Mali sections reconstruct the same four dimensions, i.e. authorization, sovereign relations, institutional instruments and capacity, and changes during implementation. The next section compares the resulting protection modes and uses a source-to-inference matrix to identify the documented dependencies underlying each vulnerability. The final section assesses the theoretical contribution and the boundary separating atrocity-specific R2P from the broader protection-of-civilians and stabilization agendas.

3.1 Libya: Coercive Protection

Libya provides the clearest case in the comparison of explicit R2P framing linked to coercive Security Council authorization. Resolution 1970 condemned violence against civilians, recalled the Libyan authorities' responsibility to protect the population, imposed an arms embargo and targeted sanctions, and referred the situation to the International Criminal Court (UNSC, 2011a). This first response combined atrocity framing with non-military coercive measures and accountability.

As violence escalated, Resolution 1973 reiterated the Libyan authorities' responsibility to protect, demanded a ceasefire, established a no-fly zone, and authorized member states acting nationally or through regional organizations to take “all necessary measures” to protect civilians and civilian-populated areas under threat, while excluding a foreign occupation force (UNSC, 2011b). The resolution was adopted by ten votes in favor with five abstentions—Brazil, China, Germany, India, and Russia—demonstrating authorization without full Council consensus (UNSC, 2011b, 2011f).

Regional politics were significant to this authorization. The Arab League's support for a no-fly zone strengthened the political basis for Council action even though the incumbent Libyan government did not consent. Glanville (2013) captures this distinction as a movement from sovereign consent toward regional consent.

Regional endorsement did not substitute legally for host-state consent, but it helped shape the political legitimacy of coercive authorization.

Libya therefore occupied the coercive end of the consent–coercion spectrum. The relevant relationship was not one of formal host-state invitation followed by operational bargaining. International military action was authorized against the wishes of the incumbent authorities on the basis of Security Council authority and civilian-protection objectives (UNSC, 2011b). This configuration distinguished Libya from South Sudan and Mali, where an international mission operated initially within a formally consensual relationship with the host state.

The absence of incumbent consent did not mean that authorization was politically unconstrained. The abstentions on Resolution 1973 and subsequent controversy over implementation showed that the coalition depended on continuing interpretations of the mandate, regional support, and Security Council legitimacy. Coercion reduced dependence on host-government operational cooperation, but increased dependence on external military capacity and the political legitimacy of its use.

The operational mode was coercive protection. Resolution 1973 supplied the legal authority for force, while external states and NATO supplied the military capabilities required to enforce the no-fly zone and protect civilians. The architecture therefore linked Security Council authorization to externally supplied coercive capacity rather than to a UN field mission dependent on host-state access.

The implementation of the mandate became contested. Kuperman (2013) argues that NATO's campaign moved beyond the limited objective of protecting civilians and contributed to regime change. That interpretation remains contested and should be distinguished from the documentary fact of what Resolution 1973 authorized. The analytical point here is narrower that coercive protection concentrated substantial capacity in the reaction phase while leaving longer-term protection dependent on a subsequent institutional transition.

After the collapse of the Qaddafi government, the institutional requirements of protection changed. Resolution 2009 established the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) to assist Libyan efforts relating to public security, political transition, rule of law, human rights, and recovery (UNSC, 2011d). Resolution 2016 then terminated the authorization for civilian-protection military measures and the no-fly zone with effect from 31 October 2011 (UNSC, 2011e). The architecture thus moved from external coercive enforcement toward political support and post-conflict institution-building.

This transition also became central to subsequent R2P contestation. Brazil's "Responsibility while Protecting" proposal emphasized criteria, monitoring, and accountability in the use of force under R2P-related mandates (Brazil, 2011). Bellamy (2015) and Welsh (2019) situate the post-Libya debate within broader contestation over the coercive dimension of R2P. These debates matter here because they reveal that authorization and coercive capacity alone do not settle questions of how protection is sustained after the immediate military objective changes.

Libya illustrates a coercive mode of protection shaped by four conditions. Security Council authorization, regional political support, the absence of consent from the incumbent government, and military capacity supplied by external actors. Resolution 1973 authorized member states to use "all necessary measures" to protect civilians, while the Arab League's call for a no-fly zone strengthened the political basis for action (UNSC, 2011b; Glanville, 2013). Together, these conditions made military action possible without the Libyan government's cooperation. They also located a key dependency outside the host state. Coercive protection required external actors able and willing to exercise force under the Council's mandate. Once that phase ended, sustaining civilian protection depended on different political and institutional capacities that the coercive operation did not itself establish. Its characteristic dependency lay elsewhere which coercive reaction capacity did not itself provide the institutions required for sustainable protection after coercion ended.

The resulting transition vulnerability is not a claim that coercive protection necessarily produces post-conflict failure. It identifies a characteristic implementation pressure e.g. the shift from externally supplied military capacity to a different set of political, security, and institutional capabilities. In Libya, the protection architecture made coercive action possible while

leaving the subsequent protection environment dependent on successful institutional transition.

The documentary sequence supporting this inference is identifiable, such as Resolution 1973 authorized coercive civilian-protection action, Resolution 2009 created UNSMIL for political and institutional assistance, and Resolution 2016 ended the authorization for military measures (UNSC, 2011b, 2011d, 2011e). The mechanism is therefore a change in the institutions and capabilities on which protection depended, not a direct inference from the mere occurrence of military intervention to later political disorder.

3.2 South Sudan: Peacekeeping-Based Protection

South Sudan presents a different institutional pathway. Resolution 1996 established UNMISS in July 2011 with a mandate centred on peace consolidation, conflict prevention, state capacity, and support for the new state (UNSC, 2011c). The outbreak of large-scale violence in December 2013 transformed the mission's protection environment. Civilians sought refuge in UN compounds on an unprecedented scale, placing UNMISS in what the Secretary-General described as uncharted territory and forcing the mission to prioritize immediate physical protection alongside its existing functions (UNSG, 2014).

Resolution 2155 formally reprioritized UNMISS around protection of civilians, monitoring and investigating human-rights violations, creating conditions for humanitarian assistance, and supporting implementation of the cessation-of-hostilities agreement (UNSC, 2014). It authorized the mission to use all necessary means within its capacity and areas of deployment to protect civilians under threat of physical violence, while reaffirming that the Government of South Sudan bore the primary responsibility to protect civilians (UNSC, 2014).

Unlike Libya, South Sudan retained a formally consensual peacekeeping framework. Yet formal consent did not guarantee smooth implementation. The mission operated with Chapter VII authority and substantial operational autonomy, while remaining dependent on access, freedom of movement, and cooperation from the host government. This produced a recurrent gap between entry or continuing consent and operational cooperation.

The creation of a Regional Protection Force under Resolution 2304 illustrates the tension. The Council expressed concern about restrictions on UNMISS operations and authorized additional capacity to provide a secure environment in and around Juba (UNSC, 2016). The episode shows why consent must be disaggregated, in which a government may continue to accept a UN mission while contesting specific deployments, restricting movement, or obstructing particular mandated activities.

Protection was organized primarily through sustained field presence rather than an external military campaign. UNMISS provided protection through PoC sites and bases, patrols, early warning, human-rights monitoring, support to humanitarian access, and the deterrent and protective effects of peacekeepers operating under a robust mandate (UNSG, 2014; UNSC, 2014). Coercive authority existed, but it was embedded within a continuing peacekeeping architecture rather than serving as the architecture's predominant form.

This distinction is consistent with scholarship showing that peace operations can contribute to operationalizing R2P while remaining institutionally and conceptually distinct from R2P itself (Hunt & Bellamy, 2011; Williams, 2016). South Sudan is, therefore, best understood as peacekeeping-based protection. Sustained international presence under formal host-state consent, equipped with robust PoC authority but dependent on the conditions required for that presence to function.

Official reporting demonstrates the practical importance of operational cooperation. During the reporting period covered by S/2016/950, UNMISS recorded 46 violations of the Status of Forces Agreement, including 29 restrictions on movement (UNSG, 2016). By 30 May 2021, UNMISS had recorded 135 SOFA violations during the relevant reporting period, 115 of them government-imposed movement restrictions (UNSG, 2021). These restrictions affected the mission's ability to reach populations, patrol, investigate, and implement mandated tasks.

The 2016 and 2021 figures refer to different reporting intervals and cannot be read as a time series demonstrating that obstruction increased by a particular percentage. They are

used instead as two documented instances of the same institutional problem i.e. an otherwise continuing mission could be prevented from reaching communities because freedom of movement was constrained (UNSG, 2016, 2021). This distinction keeps the empirical claim about operational access separate from any unmeasured claim about protection outcomes.

The significance of these figures is not that UNMISS lacked all leverage or that peacekeeping protection failed. Rather, sustained protective presence depended on a continuing set of operational conditions, such as mobility, access, logistics, personnel, resources, and sufficient host-state cooperation. Formal consent enabled a long-term international presence, but that same institutional form could not eliminate the practical dependence of protection on day-to-day cooperation.

South Sudan illustrates a peacekeeping-based mode of protection. The Security Council established UNMISS within a formally consensual relationship with the new state and later gave the mission a stronger mandate to protect civilians under threat of physical violence (UNSC, 2011c, 2014). This arrangement enabled protection through a sustained field presence. Its effectiveness, however, depended on the mission's ability to move personnel, reach affected communities, maintain resources, and carry out its mandate with sufficient cooperation from the host government.

This dependence created an *operational-cooperation vulnerability*, rather than an inevitable risk of mission failure. Formal consent allowed UNMISS to remain in South Sudan, but it did not ensure access for every patrol or other mandated activity. Reported restrictions on movement show how obstruction could limit protection even while the mission continued to operate (UNSG, 2016, 2021). Compared with Libya, the central dependency therefore shifted that coercive protection relied heavily on external military capacity and a subsequent institutional transition, whereas peacekeeping-based protection relied on continuing access and cooperation in the field.

3.3 Mali: Stabilization-Oriented Protection

Mali is the most conceptually difficult case because civilian protection was embedded within a broader stabilization response. Resolution 2085 authorized the deployment of the African-led International Support Mission in Mali (AFISMA) and responded to a crisis involving armed groups, territorial fragmentation, human-rights abuses, and threats to civilians (UNSC, 2012). Resolution 2100 subsequently established MINUSMA under Chapter VII and transferred authority from AFISMA to the UN mission on 1 July 2013 (UNSC, 2013).

MINUSMA's mandate was multidimensional. Resolution 2100 included stabilization of key population centers, support for re-establishment of state authority, support for the political transition and electoral process, protection of civilians under imminent threat of physical violence, promotion and protection of human rights, humanitarian support, protection of cultural sites, and support for national and international justice (UNSC, 2013). The Council also reaffirmed the primary responsibility of the Malian authorities for stability and civilian protection. This combination supports the classification of the case as stabilization-oriented protection rather than an "R2P stabilization" mission.

Mali's R2P connection is consequently narrower than Libya's. Resolution 2100 establishes a mandate responding to risks of violence against civilians and to serious human-rights concerns, but it does not convert every stabilization, state-support, or security activity into implementation of the four-crime R2P commitment (UNSC, 2013; Williams, 2016). Its boundary-case status is retained throughout the comparison, and the analysis focuses specifically on how the mission's protection functions depended on the wider stabilization architecture.

The mission initially rested on host-state consent and international support for restoration of constitutional order and state authority. Over time, however, the political environment changed. Coups in 2020 and 2021, changes in external partnerships, and disputes between the transitional authorities and international actors altered the conditions under which MINUSMA operated. The relevant consent trajectory therefore cannot be captured by a static consensual/non-consensual label.

Secretary-General reporting documents increasingly serious operational constraints. In 2022, restrictions on movement, no-fly zones, access limitations, and difficulties with troop

rotations impeded mandate implementation (UNSG, 2022a, 2022b). S/2022/731 recorded 27 ground restrictions and 24 air restrictions during the reporting period (UNSG, 2022b). By 2023, the Secretary-General explicitly identified freedom of movement and the ability to implement the human-rights provisions of the mandate as parameters affecting mission effectiveness (UNSG, 2023).

MINUSMA therefore organized protection through a multidimensional field architecture rather than a stand-alone coercive campaign. Civilian protection was combined with stabilization, political engagement, human-rights monitoring, humanitarian facilitation, support to state authority, and other tasks (UNSC, 2013). This breadth distinguished Mali from both Libya's externally supplied coercive capacity and South Sudan's more clearly peacekeeping-centred PoC architecture.

The distinction between MINUSMA and French counterterrorism operations must also be maintained. Resolution 2100 separately addressed French support under specified conditions, while MINUSMA retained its own UN mandate and command structure (UNSC, 2013). Treating the two as a single counterterrorism instrument would obscure the institutional configuration relevant to protection and exaggerate the extent to which MINUSMA itself was designed as a counterterrorism mission.

The deterioration in host–mission relations became increasingly visible. Resolution 2640 renewed MINUSMA in June 2022 by 13 votes in favor with China and Russia abstaining (UNSC, 2022a). The accompanying Council debate revealed disagreements over sovereignty, mandate design, human-rights reporting, and relations with the transitional authorities (UNSC, 2022b). These disagreements did not immediately end the mission, but they showed that continuing authorization operated alongside a deteriorating political environment.

Human-rights monitoring became one focal point. Following its investigation of events in Moura in March 2022, OHCHR reported strong indications that more than 500 people had been killed during a five-day operation, the vast majority summarily executed, by Malian troops and foreign military personnel; Malian authorities had denied the UN investigation team access to Moura (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 2023). The evidentiary formulation matters that the article relies on the UN investigation's stated standard rather than converting it into a broader unqualified claim about all contested events.

The trajectory culminated in withdrawal of continuing political consent. At the Security Council on 16 June 2023, Mali's representative called for the immediate withdrawal of MINUSMA (UNSC, 2023b). Resolution 2690 then terminated the mission's mandate and requested an orderly withdrawal, with completion targeted for 31 December 2023 (UNSC, 2023a). The sequence is therefore clear, as follows: initial political consent → increasingly contested operational cooperation → withdrawal of continuing consent → termination of the mission.

Mali illustrates a stabilization-oriented mode of protection in which civilian protection formed part of a wider, multidimensional mandate. Security Council authorization and initial host-state consent enabled MINUSMA to maintain a field presence that combined protection of civilians with stabilization, political support, human-rights monitoring, and support for the restoration of state authority (UNSC, 2013). The same arrangement made the mission’s protective work dependent on continuing access, freedom of movement, and a workable relationship with the Malian authorities. Restrictions on ground and air operations demonstrated how those conditions could weaken while the mission remained formally authorized (UNSG, 2022b).

Mali’s characteristic vulnerability therefore concerned the sustainability of consent over time. Initial acceptance permitted deployment, but it could not guarantee the political acceptance and operational cooperation needed for a prolonged multidimensional presence. Mali’s request for MINUSMA’s withdrawal in June 2023, followed by the Security Council’s termination of its mandate, shows how the erosion of that acceptance could ultimately end the institutional presence through which protection functions were carried out (UNSC, 2023b, 2023a). This is an inference about a dependency in Mali’s protection architecture, not a claim that every stabilization mission will lose host-state consent.

The empirical chain is distinct from South Sudan's. The restrictions on MINUSMA's ground and air operations provide evidence of operational non-cooperation, while the Malian representative's June 2023 withdrawal demand and Resolution 2690 establish the subsequent loss of political acceptance and mandate termination (UNSG, 2022b; UNSC, 2023b, 2023a). This supports an inference about the mission's dependence on continuing consent; it does not show that all stabilization operations necessarily end in withdrawal.

3.4 Comparing Protection Architectures

The three cases demonstrate that R2P-related protection cannot be reduced to an intervention/non-intervention binary. Libya, South Sudan, and Mali all involved serious protection concerns and substantial Security Council engagement, but international protection was organized through markedly different institutional configurations. Table 1 compares the architectures along common dimensions, while Table 2 links the main vulnerability claims to identifiable official records. The comparison concerns differentiated operationalization rather than three equivalent applications of a single template.

Explicit R2P language was strongest in Libya. South Sudan and Mali demonstrate greater overlap with PoC, peacekeeping, and stabilization practices. This variation is analytically important because it prevents explicit R2P vocabulary from becoming the criterion that determines whether protection practice is relevant. Hunt and Bellamy (2011) show that peace operations can contribute to R2P operationalization, while Williams (2016) emphasizes that R2P and PoC overlap without becoming identical.

The comparison also demonstrates why consent should be treated dynamically. Libya involved absent incumbent consent and externally supplied coercive capacity. South Sudan combined continuing formal consent with repeated constraints on operational cooperation. Mali moved further along the trajectory, in which initial consent enabled a multidimensional mission, operational cooperation deteriorated, and continuing political consent was eventually withdrawn. A simple consensual/coercive dichotomy would obscure these differences.

Consent, therefore, performs different functions at different stages. Entry consent may enable deployment. Operational cooperation affects the ability to implement the mandate. Continuing political consent affects whether a sustained international presence can remain. The three cases show that sovereignty relations are not external context surrounding protection architecture; they are constitutive of how particular architectures operate.

Capacity also varies by function and stage. Libya possessed substantial external military capacity for coercive reaction, but that capacity was not equivalent to the political and institutional capabilities required for post-conflict protection. South Sudan required persistent field presence, mobility, early warning, and access to threatened populations. Mali required a broad combination of military, political, human-rights, logistical, and state-support capabilities operating within a contested political relationship.

The relevant comparative question is therefore not which case possessed “more” capacity. It is capacity for what function, supplied by which institutions, under what political conditions, and at what stage? This reframing avoids treating capacity as a single independent variable and instead locates it within the architecture through which protection is delivered.

Table 1. Comparative Protection Architectures

Dimension	Libya	South Sudan	Mali
Framing/authorization	Explicit R2P framing; coercive authorization	PoC reprioritized within existing UN mission	Protection embedded in stabilization mandate
Consent/coercion	Absent incumbent consent	Continuing formal consent; constrained cooperation	Initial consent → deteriorating cooperation → withdrawal of host-state consent

Predominant mode	Coercive protection	Peacekeeping-based protection	Stabilization-oriented protection
Core capacity	External military capacity	Sustained field/PoC capacity	Integrated multidimensional capacity
Implementation trajectory	Coercive action → transition	Continuing presence under operational constraints	Continuing mission → deteriorating host–mission relations → mandate termination
Characteristic vulnerability	Transition vulnerability	Operational-cooperation vulnerability	Consent-sustainability vulnerability

Note: Arrows indicate temporal sequence within each case, not a deterministic causal relationship.

Source: Author's synthesis of the case analyses.

Table 2. Evidence-to-Inference Matrix for Mode-Specific Vulnerabilities

Case / mode	Key primary-document anchors	Observed operational dependence	Inferred vulnerability (not failure)
Libya / coercive protection	Resolutions 1973, 2009 and 2016 (UNSC, 2011b, 2011d, 2011e).	External military enforcement followed by a separate UN political and institutional support mission.	Transition vulnerability: coercive capacities did not themselves supply the later institutional functions.
South Sudan / peacekeeping-based protection	Resolutions 1996 and 2155 (UNSC, 2011c, 2014); SOFA reporting (UNSG, 2016, 2021).	Formal UN field presence persisted, but reports recorded 46 SOFA violations (29 movement restrictions) in one 2016 period and 135 violations (115 government movement restrictions) in a separate 2021 period.	Operational-cooperation vulnerability: effective protection depended on recurring access and movement cooperation.
Mali / stabilization-oriented protection (boundary case)	Resolution 2100 (UNSC, 2013); access restrictions (UNSG, 2022b); withdrawal request and Resolution 2690 (UNSC, 2023b, 2023a).	Reported 27 ground and 24 air restrictions in one 2022 period; a June 2023 withdrawal request preceded mandate termination.	Consent-sustainability vulnerability: loss of political acceptance removed the mission framework delivering protection functions.

Note: Reported restriction counts refer to separate mission-specific periods and are not directly comparable measures of protection performance. Source: Synthesis of the cited Security Council and Secretary-General documents.

The cases reveal a common structural relationship: the institutional form that enables protection also establishes dependencies through which implementation may become constrained. In Libya, externally supplied coercive capacity reduced dependence on incumbent-state cooperation during the reaction phase but created a subsequent requirement to transition toward different institutions and capabilities. The resulting transition vulnerability lay at the interface between coercive reaction and sustainable protection.

In South Sudan, formal consent enabled sustained peacekeeping presence, but protection depended on day-to-day operational conditions that the host state could facilitate or obstruct. Operational-cooperation vulnerability therefore arose not because formal consent disappeared, but because continuing presence did not eliminate dependence on mobility, access, and cooperation.

In Mali, initial consent enabled a broad stabilization presence, but the mission's continuing ability to perform its protection functions depended on sustained political acceptance. Restrictions on operations foreshadowed a deeper deterioration that culminated in withdrawal of consent and mission termination. Consent-sustainability vulnerability therefore identifies the dependence of long-duration multidimensional protection on the political viability of the host–mission relationship.

These vulnerabilities are not rankings of success or failure. Nor are they deterministic propositions. They identify characteristic points of dependence. The same institutional feature can simultaneously enable protection and create a potential source of constraint that external coercive capacity enables action but does not substitute for post-conflict institutions; host consent enables presence but creates reliance on cooperation; multidimensional integration broadens protective reach but can deepen dependence on continuing political acceptance.

The comparison shows how a shared commitment to civilian protection can take different institutional forms. Political

authorization, the relationship with the host state, and the capacity available to international actors shaped whether protection was organized primarily through external coercion in Libya, sustained peacekeeping in South Sudan, or multidimensional stabilization in Mali. Each architecture enabled particular forms of action while creating its own operational dependencies. In Libya, the critical pressure arose in the transition from coercive action to longer-term protection; in South Sudan, it lay in the mission's continuing need for access and operational cooperation; and in Mali, it lay in the political acceptance required to sustain a multidimensional presence. These are characteristic points of vulnerability, not predictions of success or failure. The comparison therefore explains how protection is organized once substantial international action occurs and why implementation may be constrained at different stages in each case. Variation lies not simply in whether international actors respond, but in how protection becomes institutionally organized once substantial action occurs.

This is the central empirical contribution of the comparison. Libya, South Sudan, and Mali are not interchangeable manifestations of R2P. Their value lies precisely in demonstrating that protection commitments can be translated through different institutional forms and that those forms structure different locations of implementation vulnerability. The institutional form that makes protection possible also structures the conditions under which implementation may become constrained.

The evidence supports a configurational inference with two important qualifications. First, the same observable restriction can have different analytical significance depending on the institution affected. Operational obstruction constrains an ongoing peacekeeping presence in South Sudan, whereas the withdrawal of consent ultimately terminates the institutional presence in Mali. Second, evidence of a transition or access problem does not establish the relative number of civilians protected or demonstrate a general causal law. The framework identifies where implementation depends on political and operational conditions and makes those dependencies open to further testing.

3.5 Theoretical Implications

The comparison supports a shift from asking whether R2P produces intervention toward asking how protection commitments become institutionally operational. Bellamy (2010) already demonstrated that R2P is broader than a doctrine of military intervention, while Welsh (2019) conceptualizes it as a complex norm containing multiple prescriptions. The contribution of differentiated operationalization is to specify variation within the institutional translation of those prescriptions.

This distinction separates two analytical problems. Selection into operationalization asks why substantial international protection action occurs in some crises but not others. Variation within operationalization asks why, once substantial action occurs, it takes a particular institutional form and what follows from that form. This article addresses the second problem. It therefore complements rather than replaces research on selectivity, political will, Security Council politics, and norm contestation.

The findings also reinforce the need to distinguish R2P from PoC and peacekeeping. Williams (2016) shows that R2P and PoC are related but distinct agendas. Hunt and Bellamy (2011) demonstrate that peace operations can contribute to operationalizing R2P. The cases examined here show why both propositions matter that an intervention-centred definition would miss important protection practices, while an overly expansive definition would collapse R2P into civilian protection generally.

Protection architecture provides an intermediate level between norm and individual practice. It is the institutional configuration through which a protection commitment is authorized, related to sovereign authority, equipped with operational instruments, and sustained. This level matters because norms do not implement themselves, but neither can individual instruments be understood apart from the authority and relationships that make their use possible.

The conceptual innovation lies in the relationship among three levels of analysis i.e. operationalization is the process by which an atrocity-protection commitment is translated into practice; protection architecture is the configuration of authorization, sovereign relations, capacities, and temporal arrangements

through which that translation occurs; and mode-specific vulnerability is the dependency inferred from that configuration when implementation is exposed to pressure. The concepts are, therefore, sequentially related but not tautological, that vulnerability must be supported by a documented pressure or transition rather than deduced from a mode label alone.

Four dimensions are especially important to the comparison: framing and political authorization, relations with sovereign authority, institutional instruments and usable capacity, and the implementation trajectory. Their configuration establishes the conditions under which a predominant mode of protection operates. The concept therefore focuses attention on configurations rather than searching for a single variable that explains every case.

The cases further show that consent should be conceptualized as an ongoing political relationship rather than a binary entry condition. Entry consent, operational cooperation, and continuing political consent may diverge. South Sudan demonstrates that formal consent can coexist with operational obstruction. Mali demonstrates that deterioration in operational cooperation can eventually become withdrawal of political consent. Libya shows that coercive protection can bypass host cooperation during the reaction phase but must rely on different forms of political legitimacy and external capacity.

Consent is thus simultaneously enabling and constraining. Its consequences depend on the function and stage of protection. This helps explain why the same concept—consent—can be associated with both sustained presence and serious implementation constraints without contradiction.

Capacity should likewise be treated as functionally and temporally specific. The capacity required to suppress an immediate threat is not identical to the capacity required to maintain a protective field presence, investigate abuses, facilitate humanitarian access, support political transition, or sustain post-conflict protection. The relevant question is capacity for what, supplied by whom, under what political conditions, and at what stage?

This formulation also prevents material capability from being detached from politics. Assets that cannot be deployed because access is denied do not constitute usable protection capacity in the same way as assets backed by authorization and cooperation. Conversely, political authorization without capable implementers can remain operationally thin. Protection architecture captures this interaction.

Mode-specific vulnerability captures the implementation implications of these dependencies. It is a characteristic implementation pressure arising from the political and institutional dependencies of a particular protection architecture. The concept does not predict failure. Instead, it identifies where an architecture is especially dependent on conditions that may deteriorate over time.

A particular protection architecture creates characteristic institutional dependencies, which in turn produce particular locations of implementation vulnerability. Transition vulnerability, operational-cooperation vulnerability, and consent-sustainability vulnerability are therefore sensitizing comparative concepts. They identify recurring questions for further research rather than universal laws.

The article makes three theoretical contributions. First, differentiated operationalization conceptualizes variation among institutional arrangements rather than merely restating that R2P has multiple tools. Second, protection architecture identifies the intermediate configuration linking normative commitment to observable practice. Third, mode-specific vulnerability shows how architectures can simultaneously enable protection and expose implementation to characteristic dependencies.

The claim to novelty is specific. Existing studies analyze R2P's normative pillars, military intervention, peacekeeping, and the overlap with PoC or peacebuilding (Bellamy, 2010; Hunt & Bellamy, 2011; Paris, 2016; Williams, 2016). The present comparison combines these concerns in one four-dimensional institutional matrix and then traces a distinct implementation dependency for each case. The resulting categories are propositions for further comparative testing, not a new legal definition of R2P or a claim that stabilization missions are themselves R2P missions.

The theoretical argument begins with R2P as a normative commitment to protect populations from atrocity crimes, but that commitment does not prescribe a single institutional response. Its operationalization depends on how political authorization, relations with the host state, and available capacity are combined in a particular crisis. These conditions shape a protection architecture and, through it, the predominant mode of protection. As implementation unfolds, that mode depends on specific political and operational conditions that may become sources of constraint. Mode-specific vulnerability thus identifies where protection is most sensitive to disruption over time, without treating that disruption as inevitable. The sequence is not deterministic and allows feedback. Its purpose is to organize comparative explanation of institutional variation within operationalization.

The broader implication is that R2P implementation is not merely uneven across crises. It is differentiated within operationalization itself. Different configurations of political authorization, sovereign consent, and institutional capacity produce distinct protection architectures. These architectures make particular forms of protection possible, while their characteristic dependencies structure where and how implementation becomes vulnerable over time.

4. Conclusion

More than two decades after its endorsement at the 2005 World Summit, the Responsibility to Protect remains characterized by a persistent tension between normative commitment and operational practice. States agreed that they bear responsibility for protecting populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity and that the international community has responsibilities to assist states and, where national authorities manifestly fail, to respond through measures consistent with the UN Charter (UNGA, 2005; UNSG, 2009). Yet this agreement does not determine how protection will be institutionally organized in particular crises.

This article investigates how R2P is operationalized through different modes of international protection in Libya, South Sudan, and Mali, and how different protection architectures shape their implementation vulnerabilities. Its central answer is that R2P operationalization is institutionally differentiated. Protection commitments are translated through different configurations of political authorization, sovereign consent, and institutional capacity. These configurations form distinct protection architectures, which make particular forms of protection possible while establishing characteristic dependencies through which implementation may become constrained.

The cases demonstrate this variation. Libya combined Security Council authorization, regional political support, absent incumbent-state consent, and externally supplied military capacity in a coercive protection architecture whose characteristic vulnerability emerged in the transition from coercive reaction toward sustainable protection. South Sudan combined formal host-state consent, sustained UN presence, and robust PoC authority in a peacekeeping-based architecture dependent on access, mobility, resources, and operational cooperation. Mali embedded civilian-protection responsibilities within a broader stabilization mission initially operating with host-state consent; as cooperation deteriorated and consent was ultimately withdrawn, the architecture revealed a vulnerability centered on the political sustainability of the international presence.

The comparison therefore identifies transition vulnerability in Libya, operational-cooperation vulnerability in South Sudan, and consent-sustainability vulnerability in Mali. These concepts are not verdicts on success or failure and do not imply deterministic outcomes. They identify characteristic dependencies within different institutional configurations—points at which the conditions enabling protection may also become sources of constraint.

The article makes three principal contributions. First, differentiated operationalization conceptualizes variation within R2P implementation rather than simply demonstrating that R2P possesses multiple instruments. Second, protection architecture provides an intermediate concept connecting normative commitment with observable practice by focusing on configurations of authorization, sovereign relations, and institutional capacity. Third, mode-specific vulnerability captures the implementation consequences of these

configurations without turning them into a theory of failure.

The framework complements the three-pillar approach. The three pillars specify the responsibilities and broad forms of response available under R2P (UNSG, 2009); differentiated operationalization examines through what institutional configuration those responsibilities become practice. It also preserves the distinction between selection into operationalization and variation within operationalization. The former concerns why substantial international protection action occurs; the latter concerns the institutional form action takes once it occurs.

The argument remains bounded. Mali is deliberately treated as a boundary case rather than as an R2P mission, and the three modes are ideal types rather than fixed categories. A larger comparative research agenda is needed to test whether similar dependencies recur within and across other coercive, peacekeeping-based, and stabilization-oriented protection settings.

For protection policy, the comparison suggests three practical questions to consider alongside authorization, such as whether coercive protection has a credible institutional handover plan; whether peacekeeping mandates are backed by usable movement, access, and logistical arrangements; and whether a multidimensional mission can maintain political acceptance while protecting its monitoring and civilian-protection functions. These are design considerations derived from the observed institutional dependencies, not evidence that one protection mode is universally preferable.

The broader implication is that evaluating R2P practice requires attention to more than whether the norm was invoked or whether international actors intervened. Analysis must examine the institutional arrangements through which protection responsibilities become operational, the political relationships upon which those arrangements depend, and whether available capacities match the protection functions required over time. R2P implementation is therefore not merely uneven across crises. Where operationalization occurs, it is institutionally differentiated. The institutional form that makes protection possible also structures the conditions under which protection may become constrained.

ETIC STATEMENT

This study did not involve human participants, animal subjects, or the collection of primary data through interviews, surveys, or fieldwork. The research relied exclusively on publicly available secondary sources, including official United Nations documents, Security Council resolutions, institutional reports, and published academic literature. Therefore, ethical approval from an institutional review board and informed consent were not required. All sources were appropriately acknowledged and cited in accordance with academic standards to ensure transparency, accuracy, and research integrity.

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