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Out with regime change

You pointed out that after the genocide in Rwanda, many countries agreed that they have a responsibility to intervene if a government fails to protect its own people (“The fall of Aleppo”, December 17th). But you then said that “The desire to promote freedom and democracy was not far behind.” Conflating “the responsibility to protect” with regime change is, in effect, one reason the tragic civil war in Syria is continuing.

Although almost 200 countries have committed to the UN’s Responsibility to Protect, which entails the right to use force to intervene in the internal affairs of others, many of them strongly oppose coercive regime change. So when America made it a precondition for negotiating a settlement in Syria that Bashar al-Assad must go, Russia correctly viewed this condition as a threat to the survival of its last ally in the Middle East.

The same issue arose in Libya, where the West first intervened because it held there was a genocide in the making. However, when Muammar Qaddafi offered to negotiate a settlement, the West forcefully insisted on regime change. What followed is another civil war. Since then Russia, China and others have soured on the responsibility to protect. A better policy would be to decouple armed humanitarian intervention from coercive regime change, and promote democracy only by non-lethal means.

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