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Principle, Power, and Institutions: Realist and Liberal Institutionalist Readings of the Responsibility to Protect in Libya and Côte d'Ivoire

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ABSTRACT

In 2011 the UN Security Council authorised force in Libya (Resolution 1973) and reinforced its peacekeeping mandate in Côte d'Ivoire (Resolution 1975) in the name of civilian protection. Both operations were read as the first major tests of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), yet their outcomes diverged sharply. Côte d'Ivoire has enjoyed relative stability for over a decade, whereas Libya remains fragmented, with rival governments, armed militias and repeatedly postponed elections. This article asks why two operations launched under the same norm, by the same Council, within weeks of each other, ended so differently. It traces each case through motive, military action and post-intervention trajectory, and interprets the evidence through realism and liberal institutionalism, drawing on indicators of fragility, human development, investment, governance and electoral participation. It argues that neither theory suffices alone: realism best explains the differing scope of great-power ambition, while liberal institutionalism best explains differences in mandate discipline, regional legitimacy and post-conflict commitment. R2P's credibility, the article concludes, depends on tighter mandates, regional partnership and an explicit responsibility to rebuild.

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The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) was born of failure. The 1994 genocide in Rwanda and the 1995 massacre at Srebrenica occurred in the presence of UN personnel, and they showed that neither strict non-intervention nor ad hoc "humanitarian intervention" could reliably protect civilians (Wheeler, 2000). The International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS, 2001) responded by recasting sovereignty as responsibility. A state's primary duty is to protect its population from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity, and when it is unable or unwilling to do so, that duty passes to the wider international community. UN member states endorsed a narrower version of the principle at the 2005 World Summit (United Nations General Assembly [UNGA], 2005). By presenting intervention as the fulfilment of sovereignty rather than its negation, R2P sought to answer the charge that humanitarian action is a cover for interference.

The year 2011 brought its first major tests. On 17 March the Security Council adopted Resolution 1973, authorising "all necessary measures" to protect civilians in Libya. On 30 March it adopted Resolution 1975 on Côte d'Ivoire (also called Ivory Coast), which demanded that Laurent Gbagbo yield power and reiterated that the UN peacekeeping mission there could use force to protect civilians (United Nations Security Council [UNSC], 2011b, 2011c). Bellamy and Williams (2011) read the two responses as signs of a new politics of protection. Yet the outcomes diverged. In Libya, an operation launched to avert a massacre in Benghazi became a seven-month NATO air campaign that ended with the fall and death of Muammar Gaddafi, followed by civil war, rival governments and militia influence that persist today. In Côte d'Ivoire, UN and French forces enforced the result of the November 2010 election, Gbagbo was arrested within two weeks of Resolution 1975, and Alassane Ouattara has governed since. The UN mission closed in 2017 with the country at relative peace.

This article asks why two operations undertaken under the same norm, authorised by the same Council and launched within weeks of each other, ended so differently. It examines each case in three stages (the motive for action, the conduct of the intervention and the post-intervention trajectory) and interprets the evidence through two leading theories of international relations. Realism expects powerful states to use moral language instrumentally and to act where their interests are engaged (Mearsheimer, 2001; Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979). Liberal institutionalism expects norms and institutions to constrain power and enable cooperation, and so locates success or failure in institutional design (Keohane, 1984; Keohane & Nye, 1977).

The cases suit a most-similar comparison (George & Bennett, 2005). They share the norm, the authorising body, the year and the triggering conduct, but differ in geopolitical weight, the role of regional

organisations, the pre-existing UN presence and the scope of the mandate as executed. The analysis draws on Security Council resolutions, reports by the UN and human rights organisations, secondary scholarship, and indicators of state fragility, human development, investment, governance and electoral participation. The article argues that neither theory is sufficient alone. Realism best explains how far each intervention's ambitions extended; liberal institutionalism best explains whether those ambitions were disciplined by mandate, regional legitimacy and a commitment to the aftermath.

Theoretical Perspectives

Realism

Realists describe international politics as anarchic: with no authority above states, survival and power are the central goals (Waltz, 1979). Morality is subordinate to interest (Morgenthau, 1948), and great powers pursue security and relative advantage (Mearsheimer, 2001). Realists therefore doubt that humanitarian motives drive intervention. They expect powerful states to invoke R2P selectively, where doing so serves strategic aims, and to use it to gain influence in weaker states under legal cover. The Security Council reinforces this view, because its permanent members hold vetoes and authorisation therefore reflects the distribution of power rather than moral necessity. Applied here, realism predicts that the case with higher strategic stakes will attract wider ambition, and that interveners will invest little in outcomes that do not serve their interests.

Liberal Institutionalism

Liberal institutionalists are more optimistic. Institutions reduce uncertainty, make commitments credible and build reciprocity, allowing cooperation to persist without a dominant power (Keohane, 1984; Keohane & Nye, 1977). On this view R2P marks a genuine change in the meaning of sovereignty, from a shield against scrutiny to a responsibility owed to citizens, a shift also stressed by solidarist writers (Bellamy, 2009; Wheeler, 2000). Liberals trust the Security Council, regional organisations and international law to legitimise and monitor intervention, and they attribute failure to weak design rather than to the norm itself. Applied here, the theory predicts better outcomes where mandates are clear, regional organisations are engaged, institutions can supervise implementation, and the international commitment extends beyond the fighting.

The Responsibility to Protect: Origins and Principles

The Canadian government established ICISS in 2000, and its 2001 report set out three responsibilities: to prevent, to react and to rebuild. The last is often overlooked. It required interveners to assist with recovery, reconstruction and reconciliation, with security as the first priority (ICISS, 2001). The 2005 World Summit Outcome narrowed the doctrine. It confined R2P to four crimes, made collective action through the Security Council a case-by-case decision, and dropped the commission's responsibility to rebuild (UNGA, 2005). The Secretary-General's 2009 report then organised the doctrine into three pillars (United Nations Secretary-General, 2009). The first is the state's own responsibility to protect its population. The second is international assistance to help states meet that responsibility. The third is a timely and decisive collective response, using peaceful means and, if these prove inadequate, force authorised by the Council.

The third pillar is the most contested, because it places the use of force in the hands of a Council whose members have unequal power. It is also where the two 2011 cases belong, though in different ways. In Libya, force was authorised against a government that did not consent. In Côte d'Ivoire, force was used by an existing peacekeeping mission that had been deployed with Council authority since 2004 (UNSC, 2004).

Case Study: Libya

Escalation and Authorisation

Protests against Gaddafi's four-decade rule began in Benghazi in mid-February 2011, inspired by the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, and the regime answered with lethal force. As the unrest became an armed rebellion, loyalist forces moved on the rebel stronghold of Benghazi. On 26 February the Council unanimously adopted Resolution 1970, which imposed an arms embargo, an asset freeze and a travel ban and referred the situation to the International Criminal Court (UNSC, 2011a). No permanent member objected, since Gaddafi had few defenders among the great powers. On 12 March the Arab League asked the Council to impose a no-fly zone.

On 17 March the Council adopted Resolution 1973 by ten votes to none. Brazil, China, Germany, India and Russia abstained. The resolution authorised "all necessary measures" to protect civilians and civilian-populated areas, created a no-fly zone and tightened the arms embargo, while excluding a foreign occupation force (UNSC, 2011b). The abstentions mattered. Russia and China did not block the text, but they later argued that it had been stretched beyond its purpose (Hehir, 2013; Thakur, 2013).

From Protection to Regime Change

Air strikes by France, the United Kingdom and the United States began on 19 March and halted the advance on Benghazi. NATO took command of the operation at the end of the month. Over the following months the campaign broadened from air defences to command and supply targets, and several states armed and trained the rebels, which sat uneasily with the arms embargo. In April the leaders of the United States, the United Kingdom and France wrote jointly that they could not imagine a future for Libya with Gaddafi in power (Obama et al., 2011). A later UK parliamentary inquiry concluded that a limited intervention to protect civilians had drifted into an opportunist policy of regime change, without a strategy for post-Gaddafi Libya (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016). Kuperman (2013) goes further, arguing that NATO's support for a rebel victory prolonged the war and raised its human cost. Gaddafi was captured and killed by rebel fighters near Sirte on 20 October 2011, after his convoy was struck from the air.

Post-Intervention Trajectory

A National Transitional Council governed during the transition, and in July 2012 Libyans elected a General National Congress (GNC) on a turnout of about 62% (National Democratic Institute [NDI], 2013). The transition then unravelled. Rival factions, many built on armed groups that had fought Gaddafi, contested control of the state. A new House of Representatives (HoR) was elected in 2014 on a turnout of roughly 18%, with about 630,000 votes cast (IFES, n.d.), and its legitimacy was challenged from the start. The GNC refused to cede power and the HoR relocated to Tobruk in the east. General Khalifa Haftar's forces launched Operation Dignity against Islamist groups, which responded with the Libya Dawn coalition, and the country split between rival authorities in Tripoli and the east (Wehrey, 2018). The war drew in outside patrons, with the United Arab Emirates and Egypt backing Haftar and the HoR because they associated their opponents with political Islam.

A UN-brokered Libyan Political Agreement in December 2015 created the Government of National Accord (GNA), which Haftar refused to recognise. The Islamic State seized Sirte in 2015, and because the state had no capable security forces, outside powers armed local militias to dislodge it. This recovered territory but entrenched armed groups that now rival the state (Chivvis, 2015; Wehrey, 2018). Haftar's assault on Tripoli in 2019 failed, and a UN-led process produced the Government of National Unity (GNU) under Abdul Hamid Dbeibah in 2021. The elections planned for 24 December 2021 were postponed indefinitely amid disputes over candidate eligibility and electoral law (Wilson Center, n.d.), and an eastern government backed by the HoR operates in parallel. By late 2026, the UN roadmap launched in August

2025 had produced incremental agreements on electoral institutions but no election date (Security Council Report, 2026).

Indicators of State Failure

The indicators point in one direction. The Fragile States Index named Libya the most worsened country of the decade to 2019 (Taft, 2020). Human development peaked around 2010; Libya's Human Development Index (HDI) then fell and recovered only partially, to 0.718 in 2021 (UNDP, 2022; see Figure 1). Foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows, which had reached nearly US$4 billion in 2007, fell to almost nothing in 2011 and rebounded only briefly in 2012 (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development [UNCTAD], 2022). In the Ibrahim Index of African Governance, Libya now scores 38.4 out of 100 and ranks 46th of 54 countries (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, n.d.). The conflict also displaced people on a large scale. The International Organization for Migration counted more than 768,000 people leaving Libya by early November 2011, although most Libyans among them had returned by the end of the year (Migration Policy Institute, 2011).

Case Study: Côte d'Ivoire

Crisis and Authorisation

Côte d'Ivoire had been divided since a 2002 rebellion split the country between a government-held south and a rebel-held north, and UN peacekeepers (UNOCI) had been deployed since 2004 (UNSC, 2004). The presidential run-off of 28 November 2010 was meant to end that division. The Independent Electoral Commission declared Ouattara the winner with about 54% of the vote, and the UN mission certified the result. The Constitutional Council, dominated by Gbagbo's allies, annulled results in northern areas and declared Gbagbo the winner. He took the oath of office on 4 December and refused to leave. The African Union, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the wider international community recognised Ouattara. ECOWAS imposed sanctions and threatened force, while Gbagbo did not accept the African Union's proposed political settlement (UNSC, 2011c).

Violence escalated in early 2011. Human Rights Watch (2011) documented at least 3,000 civilian deaths between the election and June 2011, with war crimes and probable crimes against humanity committed by forces on both sides. As pro-Ouattara forces advanced from the north in late March, the Council adopted Resolution 1975 unanimously on 30 March. It recognised Ouattara as president, demanded that Gbagbo step down, imposed targeted sanctions on Gbagbo and his associates, and reiterated that

UNOCI could use force within its mandate to protect civilians under imminent threat, with the support of French forces (UNSC, 2011c).

The Intervention

On 4 April, after Gbagbo's forces attacked UN positions and the Abidjan hotel where Ouattara's government was sheltering under UN protection, UNOCI and the French Licorne force began strikes with attack helicopters against heavy weapons held by Gbagbo's forces. Further strikes followed on 10 and 11 April, and on 11 April Ouattara's Republican Forces of Côte d'Ivoire (FRCI) arrested Gbagbo at his residence in Abidjan (Bellamy & Williams, 2011). The operation took under two weeks after the resolution, which is quick by the standards of such interventions. It was not free of controversy. The mission was criticised for taking sides (Bellamy & Williams, 2011), and Amnesty International (2011) found that UNOCI had failed to protect civilians in Duékoué, where forces aligned with Ouattara killed hundreds of people on 29 March.

Post-Intervention Trajectory

Ouattara was inaugurated in May 2011. Legislative elections followed in December 2011, he was re-elected in 2015, and legislative elections were held in 2016. UNOCI stayed for six more years, supporting disarmament, security-sector reform and elections, and closed on 30 June 2017 after the Security Council welcomed the 2015 and 2016 votes (United Nations, 2017). Justice was uneven. Gbagbo was tried at the International Criminal Court but acquitted in 2019, an acquittal made final in 2021 (International Criminal Court [ICC], 2021), while domestic prosecutions initially targeted the Gbagbo camp (Wells, 2012). Regional and ethnic divisions remain politically salient, and reliance on French forces fuelled debate about neo-colonial influence.

Indicators of Recovery

The indicators run opposite to Libya's. Côte d'Ivoire's Fragile States Index score fell from 89.7 in 2020 to 87.1 in 2023 (Fund for Peace, 2020, 2023). The World Bank's political stability indicator rose steadily from its mid-2000s trough (World Bank, 2024), and the 2016 Ibrahim Index ranked the country the most improved in Africa over 2006 to 2015 while placing Libya among the most deteriorated (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2016). Its HDI continued to rise after 2011, from about 0.47 to about 0.55 by 2021 (see Figure 1). Real GDP growth averaged 8.2% a year between 2012 and 2019, making it one of the fastest-growing economies in sub-Saharan Africa (U.S. International Trade Administration, 2023). These gains cannot be

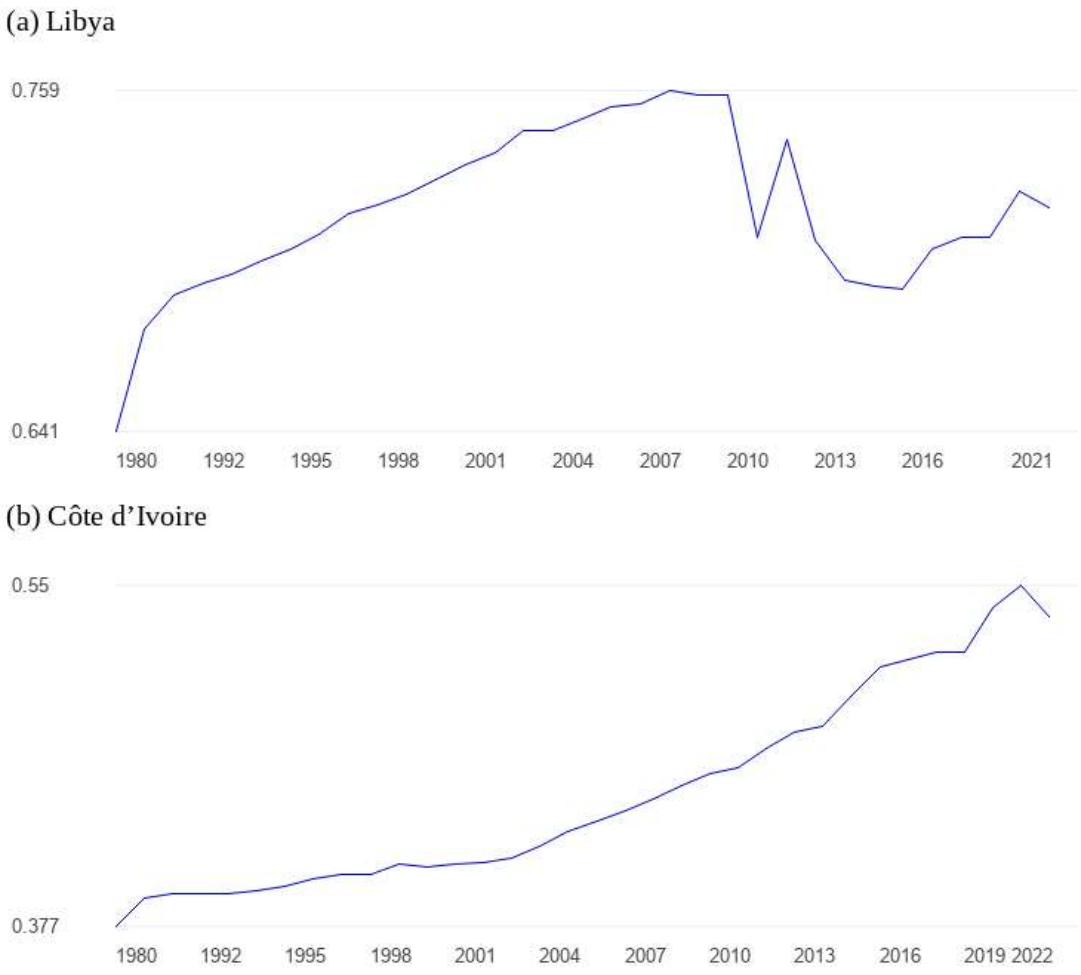
credited to the intervention alone, but they show that the post-2011 settlement held. Table 1 summarises the contrast.

Table 1 *Comparison of the Two 2011 Interventions*

Dimension	Libya	Côte d'Ivoire
Resolutions	1970 (unanimous); 1973 (10–0, five abstentions)	1975 (15–0), building on UNOCI's 2004 mandate
Trigger	Repression of an armed uprising	Violence after a disputed election
Regional position	Arab League backed a no-fly zone; African Union favoured negotiation	African Union and ECOWAS recognised Ouattara
Forces	NATO-led air campaign; rebel ground forces	UNOCI and French Licorne; pro-Ouattara forces
Mandate as executed	Widened from civilian protection to regime change	Enforcement of the election result and civilian protection
Fate of the ruler	Killed by rebels, October 2011	Arrested April 2011; acquitted by the ICC
UN presence afterwards	Small political mission (UNSMIL)	Peacekeeping mission until 2017
Outcome by 2026	Rival governments and armed groups; no national election since 2014	Elected government and sustained growth; justice and political tensions persist

Note. Compiled from the sources cited in the text.

Figure 1 *Human Development Index, 1980–2023*



Note. Charts show approximate UNDP Human Development Index values over time. The vertical axes differ between panels. Source: United Nations Development Programme, Human Development Reports.

Analysis

A Realist Reading

Realism points first to the strategic weight of the two states. Libya holds Africa's largest proven oil reserves, sits across the Mediterranean from Europe and had a long record of hostility to Western governments. Côte d'Ivoire is the world's largest cocoa producer, with a former colonial power invested in its stability but without comparable strategic leverage. Realists would expect Libya to attract wider ambition, and the record bears this out: the leaders of France, the United Kingdom and the United States moved within weeks from protecting Benghazi to demanding Gaddafi's removal (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016; Obama et al., 2011). In Côte d'Ivoire, France's historical ties and military presence made

it a willing and capable actor, but the objective was narrower: enforcing a certified election result against a ruler already isolated by African organisations. Limited aims, a clear local counterpart in Ouattara and an existing UN force kept costs low and the operation short.

Realism also helps explain why Council support for R2P proved fragile. Russia, China and other states that abstained on Resolution 1973 concluded that it had been used to remove a government, and their wariness in later crises is often traced to Libya (Hehir, 2013; Thakur, 2013). But realism has limits. If Libya was about advancing Western interests, the result was self-defeating. State collapse brought migration crises, terrorist sanctuary and the spread of weapons across the region (Foreign Affairs Committee, 2016). This looks less like successful power projection than imprudence, and realism says little about why stakes that justified striking Gaddafi did not justify securing what followed.

A Liberal Institutionalist Reading

Liberal institutionalism directs attention to design. In Côte d'Ivoire the intervention rested on institutions already in place: a peacekeeping mission deployed since 2004, a French force authorised to support it, an election result certified by the UN and a united African position that left Gbagbo isolated. Resolution 1975 passed unanimously, and its objective, enforcing a verifiable election result, was narrow and tied to earlier Council decisions. After the fighting, UNOCI remained to support disarmament, security-sector reform and elections. This sustained presence fits the liberal claim that institutions turn a short-term victory into a durable settlement.

Libya lacked these supports. No peacekeeping force was on the ground, and the Council authorised "all necessary measures" in terms broad enough to be read as covering regime change, without giving itself a means of monitoring execution once NATO took command. Regional backing was partial: the Arab League supported the no-fly zone, but the African Union favoured a negotiated settlement. Brazil's proposal on "responsibility while protecting" would have introduced procedures for monitoring and reviewing the use of force, but it was not adopted (Permanent Mission of Brazil, 2011). Above all, no institution was charged with the responsibility to rebuild that ICISS (2001) had made central. Liberals can therefore read Libya as an institutional failure rather than a refutation of the norm. This carries an uncomfortable implication: if the institutions R2P needs do not exist when the Council acts, the norm may do harm.

The liberal account also has weaknesses. UNOCI failed to prevent atrocities at Duékoué, was accused of partiality, and post-2011 justice favoured the victors (Amnesty International, 2011; Wells, 2012). Institutional strength made Côte d'Ivoire more stable, but not necessarily more just.

Comparing the Explanations

The two readings answer different questions. Realism explains the scope of ambition: where strategic stakes were high the aim expanded, and where they were limited it stayed bounded. Liberal institutionalism explains execution and aftermath: where institutions existed to define, legitimise and sustain the mission, the outcome was a stable settlement, and where they did not, battlefield success did not convert into political order. Power shaped what interveners wanted, and institutions shaped what they could deliver.

Three qualifications temper this comparison. First, two cases cannot isolate causes. Libya is large, had a hollowed-out state after four decades of personalised rule, was awash in weapons and had no peacekeepers. Côte d'Ivoire had a functioning state apparatus, an internationally recognised election winner and a long-standing UN presence. These structural differences may explain as much as strategy or institutions. Second, the Ivorian outcome is a qualified success, with contested justice and fragile politics. Third, counterfactuals are disputed. Critics argue that the threat to Benghazi was overstated and that NATO prolonged the war (Kuperman, 2013), while defenders argue that the intervention prevented a massacre (Bellamy, 2011). The evidence shows that the manner of intervention and its aftermath mattered, but it cannot settle whether non-intervention would have been better.

Conclusion

The 2011 interventions in Libya and Côte d'Ivoire were launched under the same principle yet ended very differently. Realism and liberal institutionalism each capture part of the reason. Great-power interests widened the ambition in Libya and made post-war commitment optional, while Côte d'Ivoire's narrower mandate, existing UN presence and regional consensus produced a more disciplined operation and a durable settlement. The lesson is neither that R2P is a pretext nor that it works wherever institutions are strong, but that the norm's credibility depends on how force is authorised, executed and followed through.

Four implications follow. First, mandates should state objectives and an end state, and the Council should keep supervisory control, for example through regular reporting by those it authorises to use force. Brazil's concept note offers a starting point. Second, regional organisations should be partners in design, not merely sources of endorsement, since regional legitimacy distinguished the two cases. Third, R2P needs an explicit responsibility to rebuild. ICISS (2001) proposed one, but the 2005 and 2009 formulations dropped it. A fourth pillar, or equivalent commitments, would oblige states that use force to plan for security, fund stabilisation and support political settlement, and would make post-intervention neglect a matter of

accountability rather than discretion. Fourth, consistency matters. Selective application invites the realist charge and erodes the consensus on which authorisation depends (Hehir, 2013).

This study has limits. It compares two cases and relies on aggregate indicators and secondary sources. Further comparison with other cases, and fieldwork-based evidence on post-intervention governance, would test whether the pattern holds. Whether R2P becomes a settled norm or a contested exception will depend less on the doctrine than on whether the states and institutions that invoke it accept the obligations that follow the use of force.

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