OBSERVARE
Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa
e-ISSN: 1647-7251
VOL. 17, Nº. 2
November 2026-April 2027

JANUS.NET
e-journal of International Relations

# HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION AND RESPONSIBILITY TO PROTECT: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE MERCOSUR REGION

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## Abstract

Human rights promotion in Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) has long been championed by the Organization of American States system. However, while the democratization wave starting from the 1980s has contributed to the redefinition of human rights at regional and national levels based on the broad notion of social justice, the increasing pace of regionalism has rendered it possible for the region's countries to discuss and develop multilateral human rights policies. The emergence of new priorities in the realm of human rights in the LAC mainly focused on regional issues such as eliminating the income gap, the rights of indigenous populations, and increasing political representation. Nevertheless, international and interstate conflicts of the post-Cold War period, the global discussion on humanitarian intervention, and the developing norm of responsibility to protect demanded that LAC countries define their approaches on these topics. The Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) countries have shared their stances with the international community alongside many other LAC countries. This paper explores similarities and contradictions in the approaches of MERCOSUR countries toward the idea of humanitarian intervention in international relations to discuss the possibility of the emergence of a regional approach. The paper concludes that the changing nature of international conflicts, which have evolved into interstate wars with increasing involvement of great powers, the US military interventionism now targeting South America directly, and differing foreign policy goals towards regionalism and cooperation with the Global South hamper the reach of a MERCOSUR-wide consensus on humanitarian intervention for these countries.

## Keywords

Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Humanitarian Intervention, Responsibility to Protect, MERCOSUR.

## Resumo

A promoção dos direitos humanos na América Latina e no Caribe (ALC) tem sido há muito defendida pelo sistema da Organização dos Estados Americanos. No entanto, embora a vaga de democratização iniciada nos anos 80 tenha contribuído para a redefinição dos direitos humanos a nível regional e nacional com base na ampla noção de justiça social, o ritmo crescente do regionalismo tornou possível que os países da região discutissem e desenvolvessem políticas multilaterais de direitos humanos. O surgimento de novas prioridades no domínio dos direitos humanos na ALC centrou-se principalmente em questões regionais, como a eliminação da desigualdade de rendimentos, os direitos das populações

indígenas e o aumento da representação política. No entanto, os conflitos internacionais e interestaduais do período pós-Guerra Fria, a discussão global sobre intervenção humanitária e o desenvolvimento da norma de responsabilidade pela proteção exigiram que os países da ALC definissem as suas abordagens sobre estes temas. Os países do Mercado Comum do Sul (MERCOSUL) partilharam as suas posições com a comunidade internacional, juntamente com muitos outros países da ALC. Este artigo explora semelhanças e contradições nas abordagens dos países do MERCOSUL em relação à ideia de intervenção humanitária nas relações internacionais, para discutir a possibilidade do surgimento de uma abordagem regional. O artigo conclui que a natureza mutável dos conflitos internacionais, que evoluíram para guerras interestaduais com o envolvimento crescente das grandes potências, o intervencionismo militar dos EUA agora direcionado diretamente à América do Sul, e os objetivos de política externa divergentes em relação ao regionalismo e cooperação com o Sul Global dificultam o alcance de um consenso a nível do MERCOSUL sobre intervenção humanitária para estes países.

**Palavras-chave**

Brasil, Argentina, Uruguai, Intervenção Humanitária, Responsabilidade de Proteger, MERCOSUL.

**How to cite this article**
Tekin, Segâh Zehra & Kökdere, Korkmaz (2026). Humanitarian Intervention and Responsibility to Protect: Perspectives from the Mercosur Region. *Janus.net, e-journal of international relations*. VOL. 17, Nº. 2, November 2026-April 2027, pp. 626-643. DOI https://doi.org/10.26619/1647-7251.17.2.31

**Article submitted on 4 January 2026 and accepted on 13 April 2026.**

JANUS.NET, e-journal of International Relations
e-ISSN: 1647-7251
VOL. 17, Nº. 2
November 2026-April 2027, pp. 626-643
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## Introduction

Most Southern countries are grappling with social problems caused by failed states, internal conflicts, and deepening income inequalities. The power vacuum in the post-Cold War international order has exacerbated these issues, leading to political and economic problems. The Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR) region, while an exception in many ways, is not immune to these challenges. The prevalence of food insecurity, urban violence, political instability, and economic issues has forced South American countries to critically reassess the basic norms of the international system and their regional relations and responsibilities. South American countries, Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, and Paraguay established MERCOSUR in 1991. MERCOSUR evolved from an initial bilateral cooperation between Argentina and Brazil to deepen their relations. Following the Argentina-Brazil approximation in various areas, including nuclear capacity building and security as well as the extension of existing economic relations, MERCOSUR was initially established as an organization targeting the foundation of a common market, also with an ambitious political agenda. Historically, the line that divides the Americas was not drawn between the two sub-continents but between the North America and Latin America which refers to the political, social and economic differences. The first decade of the 21st century witnessed the transformation of this division and the emergence of South America as a region inheriting the idea of integration from Latin America. The establishment of MERCOSUR and its evolvement into a long-lasting and a functional organization has certainly contributed to the emergence of a South American identity and served as a framework for the further expansion and intensification of relations between South American countries. Nevertheless, due to differences in political and economic agendas as well as geographical distances in the vast South American geography, the South American integration project has failed but as a sub-regional integration scheme MERCOSUR sustains.

This study explores the foreign policy approaches of three MERCOSUR member countries, namely Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay regarding humanitarian intervention and responsibility to protect (R2P) to analyse the similarities and contradictions in the approaches of MERCOSUR countries toward the idea of humanitarian intervention in international relations to discuss the possibility of the emergence of a regional approach.

The other founding member of MERCOSUR, Paraguay, is not included in this research due to its latecomer situation regarding participation in United Nations (UN) peacekeeping, as it started contributing with troops only in 2001 (International Peace Institute, 2016, p. 1). These three countries with their significant contributions to UN Peacekeeping Operations for decades, have been instrumental in promoting democracy and human rights at national, regional, and global levels since their transition to democracy starting from 1980s.

Based on official documents, statements, and decision-makers' discourses, as well as the academic literature, this paper explores the national views of these three countries on humanitarian intervention and R2P. The paper is organized in two sections. It firstly explains these concepts' theoretical and historical evolution in contemporary global discussions. Secondly, the paper examines the MERCOSUR region not as an economic bloc but as a smaller circle within the so-called security community of South America, based on the shared understandings of commitment to the UN system, international law, the promotion of human rights and democratic consolidation in the MERCOSUR region. This section focuses on the member countries' stances towards military interventionism and human rights protection by analysing their foreign policies, involvement in UN military operations, and views on humanitarian intervention and R2P. In the final considerations, the paper discusses the similarities, contradictions, and possibility of an emerging regional consensus in the MERCOSUR region.

## From Non-Interventionism to Responsibility to Protect: Humanitarian Intervention in Contemporary World Politics

Humanitarian intervention is the intervention of the international community, especially a foreign country or an international organization, in response to human rights violations or mass violence within a country without the authorization of the target country. The main objective of humanitarian intervention is to protect civilians, prevent death and suffering, and protect fundamental rights. Humanitarian intervention refers to the military, diplomatic, or other forms of intervention by one state against another state or within a state aimed at protecting or assisting populations facing grave human rights violations, such as genocide, ethnic cleansing, and mass atrocities. In other words, these interventions are typically a response to large-scale violations of human rights and have become a significant issue in both international relations and international law.

This concept has been broadly discussed in the discipline of International Relations based on the sovereignty of the state and international law. While those defending state sovereignty claim that humanitarian intervention is a violation of this fundamental principle, human rights advocates have stated that intervention is crucial in terms of protecting fundamental human rights. Humanitarian intervention often challenges the principle of state sovereignty, as it involves interference in a state's internal affairs without the consent of its government (Pattison, 2010, p. 46). This has sparked extensive debate regarding the balance between respecting state sovereignty and the international community's responsibility to prevent severe human suffering. Especially with the end of the Cold War in the 1990s, after the tragedies in Rwanda and the Balkans, the international community began to seriously consider how to respond effectively when

human rights are severely and systematically violated. Debates over whether the international community has the authority to intervene in a country for humanitarian reasons and whether such interventions are truly a solution to humanitarian crises have become central topics in international politics (Bellamy, 2011).

Also, another factor that places humanitarian intervention in a significant position is its legitimacy. Humanitarian intervention has become a key issue in international politics because it involves different parties, with one intervening in the sovereignty of another. In other words, humanitarian intervention is defined as "the threat or use of force across state borders by a state (or group of states) aimed at preventing or ending widespread and serious violations of the fundamental human rights of individuals who are not its own citizens" (Holzgrefe, 2003, p. 19). Given its primary objective, humanitarian intervention is carried out without the approval or consent of the targeted state. Therefore, its legitimacy has always been debated. Within this framework, the principle of proportionality becomes essential to its legitimacy. Proportionality ensures that the use of force is appropriate and not excessive in relation to the scale of the human rights violations being addressed. Thus, while humanitarian intervention seeks to protect fundamental human rights, its legitimacy is contingent upon balancing the severity of the situation with the response, ensuring that the intervention does not exceed what is necessary to achieve its objectives (Téson and Vossen, 2017, pp. 98-101) Military force for humanitarian reasons may be required when other methods fail to stop severe abuses. Some argue that all other strategies should be tried first, but when these fail, military intervention becomes a serious option. The effectiveness and necessity of intervention are subjective, often determined by those directly impacted and ultimately, the urgency of humanitarian intervention is relevant not only to the victims but to everyone, especially for those who consider themselves part of a moral and civilized global community (Janzekovic, 2006, p. 2)

While the issue of humanitarian intervention has become an increasingly debated topic in international relations, the legal basis and limits of these interventions also constitute an important area of discussion. Although international law has refrained from clearly defining humanitarian intervention, discussions on the validity and legal basis of interventions question the balance between the sovereign rights of states and human rights violations. In this context, to understand the legal dimension of humanitarian interventions, it is important to look at the regulations in the UN Charter and especially the role of the UN Security Council (UNSC). In this line, the Article 2(4) of the UN Charter obliges states to respect each other's territorial integrity and political independence (United Nations, 1945). By referring to this article, most UN resolutions from 1945 until the end of the Cold War opposed interventions in state affairs, even in cases of human rights violations. This approach reflects the UN's view of sovereignty, largely shaped by a Westphalian perspective. Although the UN Charter establishes the legal framework for interventions, the UNSC makes the final decision on whether an intervention will take place or not, particularly by using military force (Walling, 2013, p. 5; Holzgrefe, 2003, p. 37). To authorize force, the five permanent UNSC members and at least four of the nine rotating members must approve the resolution, which then becomes binding for all UN members (United Nations 1945, Chapter V). Thus, the UNSC is the only UN body with the authority to decide on humanitarian interventions. However, during the Cold War, the Security Council often rejected interventions, even when civilians were attacked, due

to its commitment to the sovereignty principle in Article 2 of the Charter (Walling 2015, p. 384). However, the UN Security Council may authorize military intervention under Chapter VII of the UN Charter in situations where severe human rights violations pose a threat to international peace and security (Binder, 2017, p. 7-9). In other words, another aspect related to sovereignty is addressed in Article 2 (7) of the UN Charter, which states that "nothing in the present Charter shall authorize the United Nations to intervene in matters that are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state or require members to submit such matters to settlement under the Charter; however, this principle shall not prejudice the application of enforcement measures under Chapter VII" (United Nations 1945, Chapter I). While this article restricts the Security Council from intervening in the internal affairs of member states, it does not completely prohibit the use of force. Specifically, Chapter VII outlines actions that may be taken in response to threats to peace, and under Article 51, the Security Council is authorized to take necessary measures to maintain international peace and security (Janzekovic, 2006, pp. 109-110). However, the UN's rules do not provide a clear roadmap for how intervention should occur in the face of human rights violations. While the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1948, and the Geneva Conventions of 1949 outline essential rights, including life, liberty, security, and freedom from slavery and torture. It also establishes political, legal, and employment standards for governments to uphold, and it is widely accepted in democratic countries as a fundamental framework for human rights, no effective intervention mechanism has been developed to address mass human rights violations (MacQueen, 2011, p. 18).

All in all, the concept of humanitarian intervention has become more apparent with the crises that occurred in the 1990s and onwards. The civil war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (1992-1995) and the genocide in Rwanda (1994) led the international community to question its responsibilities regarding humanitarian intervention. The events in Bosnia and Herzegovina brought to the fore the failure of the UN to provide aid and the failure of NATO to intervene (as in the Srebrenica Massacre). Similarly, the massacre of around 800,000 Tutsis in Rwanda highlighted the international community's failure to intervene in time, leading to a genocide (Des Forges, 1999, p. 17; Power, 2002). NATO's military intervention in Kosovo in 1999 was a significant turning point in modern humanitarian intervention. NATO conducted air operations against Serbia without UN authorization to stop human rights violations against Albanians in Kosovo (Wheeler, 2000, p. 242). This intervention has sparked controversy on the grounds that it violated the principle of sovereignty because it was carried out without the approval of the UN. However, this intervention has set an important example of how strongly the international community must respond to massive human rights violations.

By the 2000s, the concept of humanitarian intervention began to be more widely apparent in the international arena and found a more concrete foundation in international law. The "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) doctrine, developed in 2001 and adopted by the UN in 2005, argues that states have the responsibility to protect their populations from atrocities such as genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes, and crimes against humanity, and that the international community has an obligation to intervene in such situations (Evans, 2009, p. 9; ICISS, 2001). While violating the principle of sovereignty, this doctrine emphasizes the need to prevent human rights violations. The adoption of R2P has helped establish a broader understanding of humanitarian intervention, but its

practical implementation remains controversial. Specifically, while the NATO intervention in Libya in 2011, authorized by UNSC Resolution 1973, is often cited as a successful example of R2P, the subsequent chaos and civil war in Libya have highlighted the limits and challenges of applying this doctrine (Bellamy and Williams, 2011, p. 840).

These cases have sparked various debates regarding the successes and shortcomings of humanitarian intervention. Humanitarian intervention and the R2P doctrine have faced numerous criticisms from both theoretical and practical perspectives. First, although promising, the R2P remains slow to progress. For instance, in the case of the Darfur crisis, intervention by the International Criminal Court (ICC) occurred five years after the crisis (Goldhagen, 2012, p. 349). Moreover, many critics argue that humanitarian intervention often becomes a tool for Western powers to pursue their own interests, and that such interventions are shaped more by regional interests and political calculations than by a genuine intent to prevent human rights violations. Thereby, it is claimed that the principle of R2P cannot be neutral, as it grants authority based on protection capacity, favouring certain claimants and affecting internal state politics. Decisions on protection techniques, such as security reforms and redistribution, are inherently political, as they involve choices about who benefits and who sacrifices (Orford, 2011, p. 192-193). Additionally, some critics argue that the international community is highly selective when making decisions about intervention, often rejecting intervention in certain cases, which creates a moral contradiction. Another criticism is that humanitarian intervention violates the principle of sovereignty. Sovereignty of states is considered a fundamental principle in international law. However, humanitarian intervention challenges this principle, with those advocating for the right to intervene suggesting that there is something more important than sovereignty in international law.

To sum up, humanitarian intervention has sparked intense discussions both practically and theoretically since the 20$^{th}$ century, posing significant challenges in finding a balance between international law, sovereignty, and human rights. The role of states and their responses to human rights violations have made these debates even more crucial. Nevertheless, creating clear rules and intervention protocols within international law will enable the international community to act more efficiently and ethically in the future. Humanitarian intervention is a complex issue that requires a careful equilibrium between state sovereignty and the safeguarding of human rights, with the legitimacy of such interventions needing to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Moving forward, ensuring that humanitarian interventions are carried out in a transparent, unbiased, and legally sound manner will remain central to these discussions.

## Reflections from South America: Views and Criticisms of MERCOSUR Members on Humanitarian Intervention and R2P

The emergence of the idea of establishing a partnership between Argentina and Brazil in the 1980s was mainly the result of the will of the decision-makers at the time to open a new page in the relations of the two countries which was based on rivalry since colonial times and had even evolved into hostility under the military rules in the second half of the 20th century. The democratic turn in Latin America in 1980s as well as the changing and challenging global political and economic environment at global scale hastened the

approximation of the two countries. The foundation of MERCOSUR in 1991 with the participation of their two neighbours Paraguay and Uruguay, thus differs since the very beginning from the overlapping economic integration systems in the LAC region and the Organization of American States (OAS) system which was led by the United States (US).

Within this context, since its foundation, protection and promotion of democracy and human rights has become one of the primary goals and working areas of MERCOSUR as an organization. Nevertheless, considering the political and military environment in South America; the colonial past, legacy of U.S. interventionism in the LAC region, and absence of interstate military conflicts between South American countries for decades, oriented the human rights dimension of the MERCOSUR system as a protective shield against authoritarianism and state-led human rights violations with an extensive focus on the connection between development and human rights. But the interstate and intrastate conflicts of the post-Cold War period occurring in other regions of the world, the global discussion on humanitarian intervention, and the developing norm of R2P demanded that MERCOSUR countries define their approaches on these topics as well as other LAC countries.

Currently, four founding member countries of MERCOSUR; Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay continue to exist as only full members of the organization. Membership of Venezuela was suspended in 2017 (MERCOSUR, 2017) and Bolivia's adhesion is still under progress. Without omitting the discrepancies between economic, demographic, and military resources of Uruguay and the other two-Argentina and Brazil- these three countries are chosen for analysis since they have been regular contributors to UN peacekeeping operations since the mid-20th century and have contributed to the debate on humanitarian intervention and especially the emerging norm of R2P in the international arena. On the other hand, there has been limited national and international-level discussion on these issues by Paraguayan decision-makers. The most recent official view of this country can be summarized from a statement delivered by Paraguayan diplomats at the UN General Assembly in 2017, reiterating the country's "respect for international law and particularly humanitarian and human rights law" (Statement by Paraguay, 2017) with no specific view on either humanitarian intervention or the emerging concept of R2P.

## Brazil

Brazil's traditional foreign policy approach, based on respect for international law and peaceful resolution of international conflicts, is accompanied by non-interventionism and respect for the sovereign rights of states in the country's constitution, which was prepared following the transition to democracy in the late 1980s. The 1988 Constitution has a specific article (Art 4) regarding foreign policy to determine the founding pillars of the country's foreign relations. Non-intervention, self-determination, peaceful solution of conflicts, and equality among nations are among them and reflect the traditional Brazilian foreign policy approach (Constituição da República Federativa do Brasil, 1988).

Nevertheless, the new international insertion of Brazil under Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff's Worker's Party (PT) governments (2003-2016) required change to bring Brazil closer to its long-desired great power status. Their "new foreign policy" motto did

not refer to a significant alteration in foreign policy goals but to a change in the means to approach the traditional goals of ascendance to the great power status and fulfilling the requirements of complete socio-economic development. Thus, during two consecutive terms of Lula's presidency, Brazil's foreign, security, and economic policies were re-designed to reach these goals through extending and deepening South-South relations starting from LAC, African, and Arab countries as well as other emerging powers of the 21st century. Rousseff's one-and-a-half term presidency, interrupted by a civil coup to impeach her, continued as a weaker version of Lula's foreign policy.

Brazil focused on increasing its activism in international organizations starting from the UN (Abdenur, 2014, p. 1879) and tried to advocate concerns and demands of the Global South starting from the LAC region. Brazilian calls for a change in the UNSC membership compound, Brazil's BRICS membership, a renewed interest in South-South cooperation with middle and small powers to overcome developmental problems and promote expertise sharing, and even the foundation of The Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) as an all-encompassing LAC organization without the shadow of the US exemplify Brazil's desires for a new global order and Brazil's place in it.

Within this context, firstly, Brazil has reoriented its constitutional and traditional principle of non-intervention not legally but politically to approach Southern countries with a developmental focus. Brazil's version of non-indifference, which originates from the African continent (Brussi, 2016, p. 297), was thus born into primarily Brazil-South America relations to legitimize Brazil's increasing political and economic interest in the region. Secondly, among MERCOSUR members, Brazil has been the most vocal in criticizing US-led armed interventions in the Middle East. Brazil tried to benefit from the diminishing interest of the US in South American affairs since the end of the Cold War, which was marked by US military and political interventionism in the LAC region throughout most of the 20th century and tried to approach Arab countries as an economic and political partner. Based on the idealist discourse of the PT governments on anti-imperialism and global solidarity, such vocal criticism also pragmatically served Brazilian diplomacy to approximate with Middle Eastern countries and disseminate its ideas on a future global security order.

As a traditionally renowned country for the capabilities of its diplomats, Brazil has tried to promote peaceful mediation of international conflicts, from South America to the Palestinian Israeli conflict. Brazil presented this endeavour not as a "magic solution" to the problems but as bringing "new perspectives" and "fresh ideas" (Amorim, 2011). The Friends of the Venezuela Group, led by Lula's efforts to resolve the tension between Hugo Chavez and the US, the Side by Side initiative, which tried to contribute to a solution of the conflict in Palestine, and the Turkish-Brazilian joint initiative of the Tehran Declaration are examples of Brazil's efforts to promote peaceful conflict resolution in the regional and global arenas (Tekin, 2018). Followingly, Brazil made some alterations in its approach to international peacekeeping. It has been an active participant in UN activities and UN Peacekeeping Missions since the foundation of this organization. Brazil's participation in international peacekeeping can be even dated earlier than the foundation of the UN, considering the country's service during the Leticia Dispute in the 1930s under a League of Nations mission. Despite being a contributor to international peacekeeping for almost a century, Brazil has always been reluctant to participate in the combatant cadres of

these missions. However, realizing that to reach its assertive foreign policy goals, Brazil needed more military commitment to international peacekeeping.

Eventually, during the post-2003 period, Brazilian decision-makers tried to contribute to and somewhat dominate the debate on R2P by introducing two approaches: non-indifference vs. non-intervention and responsibility while protecting (RwP) vs. R2P. Brazil benefited from its new approach of "non-indifference" and started to play a leading role in specific missions, such as the MINUSTAH in Haiti and UNIFIL in Lebanon. Nevertheless, Brazilian diplomats negotiated with the UN on the aims and scopes of these missions and tried to highlight the social and economic contribution of these missions to the peacebuilding efforts (Harig and Jenne, 2022, pp. 656-657). In this way, non-indifference which was used by Brazil as a facilitator of its engagement in South America (Saraiva, 2010, p. 161), was extended in scope by the decision-makers. Non-indifference is a framework from Africa and promoted by the African Union as a regional approach to R2P (Sharpe, 2017, pp. 11), which Brazil shares with African countries. It provides Brazil a framework combining developmental support with protection of human rights. Brazil has launched the place of non-indifference in its foreign policy in 2004 as a justification for sending many troops to the UN mission MINUSTAH in Haiti, which it would also command, not as a significant alteration but a continuation of the constitutional non-intervention principle (Spektor, 2012, p. 57).

Regarding military interventions with or without humanitarian justifications, Brazil has not been supportive during the 20$^{th}$ century. Brazil was a temporary member of the UNSC and abstained when the Resolution 1973, which would later serve as the basis for NATO intervention, was voted (Arredondo, 2015, 81). However, despite their previous criticism of US military interventions in the Middle East, the then President of Brazil, Rousseff, did not object to the intervention in Libya and accepted R2P with reservations, though her predecessor, Lula administration, had criticized the emerging norm of R2P following its launch as a UN initiative in 2005 (Spektor, 2012, p. 57). The RwP proposal, an authentic Brazilian amendment in R2P, aimed to redefine the criteria for initiating military interventions with humanitarian objectives. This proposal, closely linked to Brazil's call for reform in the UNSC's structure and operations, was of global significance. The RwP raised crucial questions about the conditions under which the UN can authorize the use of force. Regarding RwP, which Brazil adopted in 2011 to express its concerns about the military dimension of R2P, the onset of the Syrian Civil War in the same year was a crucial turning point. RwP, launched by President Rousseff at the UN General Assembly in 2011, was not a substitute for R2P, but a more refined version (Siquiera and Luz, 2023, p. 135). Unfortunately, Brazilian rejection of the possibility of a Libyan-style military intervention in Syria (Spektor, 2012, p. 58) did not coincide with the general air of the moment, which at the time diminished Brazil's prestige, although such humanitarian intervention never occurred.

Considering non-indifference and RwP, the first one was abandoned soon after at first during Temer (Serra, 2016) and then Bolsonaro presidencies after 2016. Although Lula retook office in 2023, political changes in Brazil, along with the changing nature of international conflicts, limited the country's ability to actively engage in peace promotion. The ongoing Russo-Ukrainian War and the recent Iran War are conflicts between

independent states and involve great powers. Despite trying to contribute to resolving these conflicts, Brazil found little space to manoeuvre.

Under the third Lula government, regarding international conflicts, Brazil has been most vocal about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict without leaving its traditional commitment to the two-state solution. In the immediate aftermath of the October 7 attacks, President Lula, on an X post, made a call to the UNSC and the international community and demanded a "humanitarian intervention" to protect both Israeli and Palestinian children (da Silva, 2023). However, even the social-media posting without a solid and official diplomatic initiative and Brazil's not going far from showing solidarity at a symbolic and discursive level with the Palestinians reveal Brazil's diminishing involvement in the global discussion on the protection of the vulnerable. The reasons vary depending on the nature of the conflict and Brazil's political and economic interests. Nevertheless, the main factors are the US involvement in ongoing global conflicts and increasing US interventionism in the LAC region, which Brazilians have reflected on ambiguously. Although the Lula government openly condemned the US military interventionism in Venezuela and Iran as well as its threats towards Cuba, the desire to comply with the regional and global interests of the US which is reflected previously in Jaír Bolsonaro government as well as the current Javier Milei government in Argentina has certainly affected Brazilian stance on humanitarian intervention and R2P by making the official policies more vulnerable to domestic political changes and the changing nature of international conflicts.

## Argentina

The traditional foreign policy of Argentina, regarding non-intervention and self-determination, is like that of Brazil, albeit with exceptions. Argentina has been active in UN peacekeeping operations since 1958. Like Uruguay, Argentina's long-term commitment to international peacekeeping was mainly limited to observer missions. The situation changed in the 1990s, and the country started to send troops in increasing numbers (Pereira, 1996, p. 2-3). The Argentinian Navy participated in the First Gulf War in 1990-1991 as a non-combatant contributor under the presidency of Carlos Menem, who sought to establish close cooperation with the US. In the 1990s, the Menem government declared its desire to become a permanent member of the UN. As a result of its close collaboration with the organization in peacekeeping, Argentina finally sent troops abroad for the first time to participate in the UN mission in Croatia in 1991 (Colombo, 2019, p. 23; Pereira, 1996, p. 6-9).

During the 2000s, while continuing its traditional non-interventionist approach, Argentina became an early contributor to the work of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS). Following this, Argentina's leftist president Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's consecutive two terms between 2007 and 2015 witnessed the country's support for the emerging R2P, and Argentina even became a member of the "Group of Friends of R2P" at the UN (Serbin and Serbin Pont, 2015: 26).

Regarding the discussion on R2P, Argentina questioned the proposal without criticizing its legitimacy. Argentina's concerns mainly revolved around the implementation phase and how it can be conducted without committing more human rights violations. Despite its concerns, Argentina participated in the UN General Assembly sessions on R2P and

voted in favour (Colombo, 2019, p. 25-27). Argentina's main concern about the R2P proposal was the third pillar, which paves the way for a response authorized by the UNSC based on the permission to resort to force under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. The country was also in favour of multilateralism within the UN system for such a military intervention, stressing the potential consequences of unilateral actions and the need for a responsible, collective approach (Arredondo, 2015, p. 77). Without omitting the international community's responsibility to solve the crisis in either Libya or Syria, Argentina criticized the NATO intervention in Libya based on concerns regarding the legitimacy and protection of civilians. It expressed concerns for the fate of a similar interventionist approach in Syria. Argentina also supported Brazil's RwP proposal during an informal discussion at the UN in 2012, in its capacity to address questionable parts of the original R2P proposal and contribute to its further development (Arredondo, 2015, p. 82-83). Argentina's support for the R2P and its participation in the related activities continued under the center-right Mauricio Macri government. (Statement by Argentina, 2017). Actually, despite foreign policy changes under different governments, Argentina continued to participate in the activities of the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect and is a member of the Global Network of R2P Focal Points alongside the two other MERCOSUR member states, Paraguay and Uruguay (Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, 2022). Argentina also continues its membership in the Group of Friends of R2P alongside Uruguay.

Current Argentine foreign policy under the liberal Milei government focuses primarily on "returning to the side of the West." This is being achieved through the strengthening of partnerships with the U.S. and Israel, as well as NATO-member European countries. The government's commitment to the realization of the EU-MERCOSUR deal on free trade and the continuation of the traditional claim of the country on the sovereignty of the Falklands/Malvinas are clear indicators of this focus. Equally important is the government's commitment to the traditional proactive approach to overcoming its peripherical geopolitical location through its dedication to involvement in international organizations at global and regional scales (La Oficina de Información Diplomática, 2025, p. 3). Although Milei has committed his government to reorienting Argentine foreign policy, with limited interest in cooperation with both the MERCOSUR region and the Global South (Frenkel and Maresca, 2026) the country continues to work within the UN system to contribute to the development of R2P (Global Centre for Responsibility to Protect, 2026).

## Uruguay

Uruguayan foreign policy, just like Argentina and Brazil, prioritizes multilateralism. Uruguayan participation in UN peacekeeping operations started in 1949, and the number and composition of the personnel sent have considerably increased over the last decades. Having relied on contributing to UN peacekeeping as a tool for international engagement and reaching specific diplomatic and economic goals, Uruguay still needs to fulfil its aims. On the contrary to Brazil, the country, as a small nation, does not have space for leverage to determine the location, scope, and goals of a mission (Gonnet and Hernandez, 2007). Unlike Argentina and Brazil, Uruguay's foreign policy goals linked to participation in UN peacekeeping have been limited. The country has mainly benefited from sending troops

abroad for domestic economic reasons and reorganizing civil-military relations throughout the democratic consolidation process after military rule (Guyer, 2014, pp. 33-34). Uruguay was a committed supporter of the R2P initiative in the UN alongside Chile, Colombia, and Peru from South America (Colombo, 2019, p. 24).

Uruguay's support for the R2P continued under different presidencies, albeit with different focuses. In a recent note by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the country reminded that it has supported the principle since its adoption by the UN in 2005. It highlighted the importance of developing conflict-prevention capacity and the need to prevent crisis escalation to protect at-risk populations. (Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de Uruguay, 2025).

Uruguay's current foreign policy takes an active stance on regional and international developments. At the international level, Uruguay is currently the annual president of the G77 and China bloc. Uruguayan President Yamadú Orsi is also the President pro tempore (current rotating chair) of MERCOSUR from July to December 2026 and the President pro tempore of CELAC for 2026-2027. These responsibilities certainly affect the Orsi government's foreign policy approach. Prioritizing the LAC over the MERCOSUR sub-region, deepening ties with the Global South, and maintaining a cautious relationship with Argentina's Milei government define the Orsi government's priorities (Fernández Luzuriaga, W. and Cingia Mascaró, G., 2025: 25). In this context, on different occasions, Uruguay's Foreign Minister Mario Lubetkin has reiterated the country's commitment to multilateralism, non-interventionism, and respect for international norms as an anchor for coping with challenges at the regional and international levels (Lubetkin, 2025; Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores de Uruguay, 2026).

## Final Considerations

The paper claims that three significant reasons lie behind the shared hesitation of the MERCOSUR-member South American countries toward military humanitarian intervention and their preference to focus on contributing to the debate on R2P instead. The first one is their colonial past, which resulted in a strong emphasis on autonomy in their legal and political traditions. The second one is the notorious history of US military interventionism in LAC. Moreover thirdly, the legacy of domestic military intervention and human rights violations overshadows the goal of reaching humanitarian solutions through military means. The paper concludes that complications in the contemporary relations with the US and differing foreign policy goals hamper the reach of a MERCOSUR-wide consensus on humanitarian intervention for these countries. Emerging interstate conflicts in the international arena also cause fluctuations in their prioritization of military means for humanitarian protection over non-military means. Secondly, the legacy of the foreign policies of these three countries and Paraguay depends on respect for international law, taking part in the UN system, and peaceful solutions to conflicts. Considering the three countries' active involvement in UN Peace Missions since the mid-20th century and Paraguay joining them, it can be claimed that UN authorization for a military intervention is a condition of legitimacy for these countries.

Regarding the international discussion on R2P, Uruguay's position favoured the norm's development. At the same time, Argentina's and Brazil's views represented their demand

for revision in R2P without rejecting its goals and humanitarian stance. However, Brazil's RwP remained a vague proposal with limited prospects of addressing the realities of conflict situations. It is also not surprising that even R2P, with solid backing from the international community, has not evolved into an international norm set aside from Brazil's contribution to the matter. Although Lula's third term, which started in January 2023, evoked new hopes regarding the return of Brazil as Lula promised after the election victory, the country's selected silence on the Venezuelan crisis and its humanitarian dimension before the US intervention, proved that both non-indifference and RwP promotion have always had limited promise for Brazilian foreign policy.

Considering the overall response from the LAC region, Argentina and Brazil played a distinguished role among Latin American countries, which were divided as strong supporters and critics of the proposal. It is worth noting that apart from Uruguay's unconditional and Paraguay's not-so-vocal commitment to R2P, MERCOSUR's big partners questioned the proposal without total rejection. The Pacific Alliance members were mainly the applauders, while ALBA-TCP members Venezuela and Cuba were the critics (Colombo, 2019, pp. 24-25; Serbin and Serbin Pont, 2015, p. 27). It can be concluded that Argentina and Brazil tried to develop a generalized approach limiting military interventionism in international relations. Nevertheless, this approach results in most of the time not distinguishing between humanitarian causes of an intervention and interest-based ones.

MERCOSUR countries were more vocal about sharing their views on the R2P a decade ago. However, their activism in this area has diminished due to national, regional, and international changes. At the national level, these three countries shared both hesitations regarding supporting the increasing military interventionism at the global level and the leftist notion of solidarity with the Global South. This contradiction resulted in advocating for respect for the non-intervention principle of international law without omitting the international community's responsibilities in protecting human rights and preventing violations. They also shared a critical view on US-led and possibly unilateral military interventionism by prioritizing the prevention of military interventions instead of the protection of human rights, with giving little thought to humanitarian and non-humanitarian causes of interventions. Today, domestic political changes challenging previous foreign policies, along with the changing nature of regional security issues and international conflicts, have shifted MERCOSUR countries' foreign policy priorities and their relations with one another, even though they have not revoked their commitment to the UN system or their participation in peacekeeping operations. Given the region's political situation, the need to sustain stable relations with the US amid US military interventionism targeting South America, and differing foreign policy goals, a MERCOSUR-wide consensus on humanitarian intervention remains elusive.

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