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Petro's Challenge: Decolonising R2P in Gaza

Latin America's Challenge to the Selective Enforcement of Humanitarian Protection Norms

3 Main Points

This brief examines how Colombian President Petro's call for R2P intervention in Gaza challenges Western selective enforcement of humanitarian norms. It argues that Petro



exposes how imperial powers control intervention based on geopolitical interests, not humanitarian need. Drawing on Latin America's shared colonial history with Palestine, Petro reclaims R2P as collective Global South responsibility, positioning formerly colonized nations as corrective actors redefining humanitarian protection.

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Having lived in Mexico, Great Britain, and the United States, I can often provide a dissimilar opinion /view to that of my peers as well as listen attentively to theirs. My passions lie in the rights of 'Global South' communities and environments I am hardworking and seek to extend my knowledge of International Relations and Modern history to inform any challenge put before me.

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Abstract

This brief examines how Colombian President Petro's call for R2P intervention in Gaza challenges Western selective enforcement of humanitarian norms. It argues that Petro exposes how imperial powers control intervention based on geopolitical interests, not humanitarian need. Drawing on Latin America's shared colonial history with Palestine, Petro reclaims R2P as collective Global South responsibility, positioning formerly colonized nations as corrective actors demanding accountability and redefining humanitarian protection.

. Introduction

“Words are no longer enough (...) We need a powerful army of countries that do not accept genocide” ([Petro, 2025](#)).

On 23rd September, Colombian President Gustavo Petro stood before the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) and condemned what he described as a “mute witness to a genocide” in Gaza. This statement directly challenged to the international community, which has systematically failed to prevent a deterioration of the humanitarian crisis in Gaza since



2023. However, this statement carries significant legal weight, as it invokes what is known as the principle of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P).

R2P, a key principle of international humanitarian law, was born following the disastrous responses by the international community to genocides which took place in Rwanda (1994) and Srebrenica (1995). Unanimously adopted by UN member states at the 2005 World Summit ([UN Doc A/RES/60/1](#)), as a non-binding political commitment, R2P reframed sovereignty to ensure that the States “never again” stand idle before genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing or crimes against humanity ([UN Doc A/RES/60/1](#)). Yet as Gaza's humanitarian crisis deepens, with tens of thousands of civilian casualties and accusations of genocidal intent before the UN Committee (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2025), the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (UNSC) remain conspicuously silent or actively obstructive.

Petro's call for action exposes what can be seen as blatant and repeating failure at the heart of R2P, which becomes visible through the lens of decoloniality, a theoretical framework that reveals how colonial logics and power structures persist in shaping contemporary global relations, demanding a delinking from these entrenched hierarchies ([Mignolo and Walsh, 2018](#)). R2P application remains bound by imperial power: the institutional, economic, and military dominance through which former colonial centers maintain global control, enabling selective deployment of humanitarian discourse to discipline geopolitical adversaries while immunising allied states from accountability ([Bellamy, 2010: 150–152](#); [Deciancio et al., 2024: 97–99](#)). This selectivity perpetuates post-colonial hierarchies embedded within international institutions, where strategic interests and decolonial power dynamics determine whose lives merit protection and whose suffering can be rationalised away. ([Hindawi, 2021: 45–47](#); [Dunford, 2025: 6](#)). In response, many Latin American countries, such as Chile ([United Nations, 2024](#)), Brazil ([Lula da Silva, 2025](#)), and Bolivia ([United Nations, 2024](#)) have joined Petro in reclaiming human rights language to challenge the imperial power structures that continue to determine the boundaries of international justice.



This brief examines Petro's challenge through three interconnected lenses. First, it traces the history and contested development of R2P to reveal how its universal ideas have been undermined by selective application. Second, it situates Petro's stance within Latin America's shared history of colonialism and its ongoing effort to reclaim moral agency in the language of humanitarian protection. Finally, it examines President Gustavo Petro's call for a humanitarian intervention in Gaza as a decolonial perspective exposing the structural hierarchies within the UN system. These sections are structured to aid in answering the question: "How does Colombian President Petro's call for R2P intervention in Gaza challenge the West's inconsistent implementation of humanitarian protection norms?"

II. The R2P Doctrine and Its Origins

Emerging from the failures in Rwanda (1994) and Srebrenica (1995), the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) was conceived as a moral and legal response to the paralysis of international institutions in the face of atrocity ([ICISS, 2001](#); [United Nations, 2005](#)). Nevertheless, the principle's post-Cold War origins also reflected the geopolitical context in which it was developed, one dominated by Western interventionism and liberal humanitarian discourse ([Bellamy, 2011](#)). For many Global South states, the framing of sovereignty as "responsibility" rather than "right" evoked deep suspicion, recalling a history in which humanitarianism often masked imperial ambitions ([Serrano, 2016](#); [Thakur, 2006](#)). It is within this tension between moral aspiration and structural inequality that postcolonial scholars, such as Hindawi ([2021](#)), locate R2P's contested nature, arguing that its universalist promise cannot be separated from the hierarchies embedded in its formation.

Although R2P is frequently portrayed as a Western instrument of hegemonic control ([Bellamy, 2011](#); [Serrano, 2016](#)), postcolonial scholar Roza Hindawi ([2021](#)) contends that this obscures the Southern agency in shaping the doctrine. The nomenclature itself, as Responsibility to Protect rather than a right to intervene, reflects the Global South's insistence during the negotiations on constraining scope and reinforcing sovereignty protections ([Bellamy, 2011](#); [Serrano, 2016](#); [United Nations, 2005](#)). However, the author ([Hindawi, 2021](#)) argues that Western modernity, that is a Eurocentric model of progress



rooted in rationalism and spread through colonial domination ([Rahaman, 2022](#); [Wagner, 2012](#)) was built upon colonial violence that predated the nation-state system and thus could never have warranted R2P intervention when colonised people needed it most. Southern states advocated for R2P precisely because they continue experiencing the reverberations of colonial encounters that international law failed to prevent ([Hindawi, 2021](#); [Thakur, 2006](#)). As Said ([1993, as cited in Bilgin, 2016, p. 140](#)) observed, contemporary norms are embedded within “intertwined and overlapping histories”. Thus, R2P is institutionalised within power structures shaped by colonial pasts that determine whose suffering demands protection.

Nevertheless, R2P's 2005 codification did not mean its consistent application ([Bellamy, 2010](#); [Glanville and Pattinson, 2021](#)). NATO's intervention in Kosovo ([1999](#)) and Libya ([2011](#)) demonstrated both potential and abuse, as humanitarian protection was manipulated in favor of regime change, undermining legitimacy and fueling Global South suspicions ([Bellamy, 2010](#); [Glanville and Pattinson, 2021](#); [Rodriguez, 2022: 49](#)). In response, Southern states, like Brazil proposed constraining mechanisms, the Responsibility while Protecting (RwP) framework demanded procedural safeguards ([Kenkel & Stefan, 2016](#)), while Ban Ki-moon's Three-Pillar Strategy ([2009](#)) further clarified responsibilities and response criteria. This contested evolution of R2P illuminates why Latin American states, drawing on their own experiences of colonial violence and foreign intervention, have positioned themselves alongside Palestine in challenging the selective enforcement of humanitarian protection norms, a common cause explored in the following section.

III. Decolonial Solidarity: Latin America and Palestine’s Shared History

Latin America's advocacy for Palestinian protection emerges from its own long and protracted experience of colonial violence and its aftermath. From the 1492 European invasion through the imposition of a racial caste system under Spanish rule, European colonialism structured Latin American societies along rigid hierarchies that privileged European settlers while systematically marginalising indigenous and African-descendant populations ([Bakewell, 1997](#); [Quijano, 2000](#); [Mignolo, 2007](#)). Facing this long history of European domination, decolonial theorist Quijano ([2000](#)) terms “coloniality” as the enduring



colonial logic that outlasted formal independence, which becomes visible in how these hierarchies embedded themselves in law, land ownership and governance structures ([Dunford 2025](#)). In this regard, European modernity and the nation-state system – a model of political organisation that required territorial sovereignty and centralised authority to participate in international relations ([Krasner, 1999](#)) – arose from this colonial plunder; colonised countries were forced to adopt state structures born from their own dispossession, ensuring minorities remained marginalised within systems designed by colonial elites ([Quijano, 2000](#)). This colonial inheritance informs how Latin American states approach sovereignty, intervention and international protection, with both historical societal trauma (born of experiencing dispossession) and institutional caution (born of experiencing intervention disguised as protection).

Palestine's colonial experience operates through strikingly parallel logics. The establishment of Israel in 1948 imposed territorial reorganization and racialized hierarchies that dispossessed indigenous populations, mirroring how the caste system stratified Latin American societies to facilitate extraction and control ([Hindawi](#); [Deciancio et al., 2024](#); [Pappe, 2006](#); [Khalidi, 2020](#)). Just as the casta system created a rigid hierarchy—with peninsulares (Spanish-born) at the top, followed by criollos (American-born Spanish), mestizos, indigenous peoples, and enslaved Africans at the bottom ([Ebert, 2008](#))—each with codified legal rights to land ownership, political participation, and social mobility—the Israeli system similarly stratifies populations through bureaucratic classification ([Bakewell, 1997](#); [Quijano, 2000](#)). Palestinians today are assigned different identification documents based on location, each conferring vastly unequal rights to movement, residency, work permits, family reunification and access to land and resources ([Alsaafin, 2017](#); [Tawil-Souri, 2011](#)). Both systems utilize legal categorization to facilitate extraction and control: the casta system enabled Spanish extraction of labor and resources while maintaining racial dominance, just as Israel's ID system restricts Palestinian access to their ancestral lands while enabling settlement expansion and resource appropriation ([Lentin, 2017](#); [Tawil-Souri, 2011](#)). This administrative apparatus renders certain populations legally disposable while protecting



others, institutionalizing colonial hierarchy through seemingly neutral bureaucratic mechanisms.

For Latin American states like Colombia and Brazil ([Lula da Silva, 2025](#)), these structural parallels make recognition of Gaza's crisis an act of decolonial solidarity rather than mere diplomatic posturing ([Garbe, 2022](#); [Morris, 2016](#)). Latin American leaders recognize the pattern: foreign powers imposing territorial boundaries (Spanish viceroalties/Israeli occupation zones), creating racialized legal categories (casta classifications/ID colors), dispossessing indigenous populations from land (encomienda system/settlement expansion), and justifying domination through civilizational narratives (Spanish Christianity/Western democracy) ([Mignolo, 2007](#); Khalidi, 2020). Therefore, by demanding the principled application of R2P in Gaza, these states challenge the colonial logic determining whose suffering counts—a challenge that finds expression in President Petro's call to action before the UN General Assembly, where decolonial solidarity transforms into active intervention against Western complicity.

IV. Petro's Challenge: Context and Content

Gustavo Petro's denunciation of Israel's actions in Gaza as "genocide" ([Petro, 2025](#)) represents more than a diplomatic call for action; it constitutes above all else a deliberate moral and political challenge to Western hegemony. As Colombia's first left-wing president and a former leftist guerrilla fighter turned reformist ([Wallenfeldt, 2025](#)), Petro's worldview has been shaped by the U.S.-backed military interventions in Latin America ([Deciancio et al., 2024](#)). His anti-imperialist rhetoric recasts Gaza not simply as a humanitarian tragedy but as proof of the Global North's enduring moral contradictions, echoing the principles he defended during his years in the guerrilla and now channels through his critique of R2P ([Bellamy, 2009](#)). In doing so, Petro reclaims humanitarian language as a Southern moral project, repositioning Colombia and Latin America within a broader movement to redefine who holds the right to speak on behalf of humanity ([Hindawi, 2021](#)).

Petro's assertion that "diplomacy has already failed" ([Petro, 2025](#)) extends this moral critique into an institutional one. The address was a direct challenge to the UNSC and its



persistent use of the veto, particularly the United States' continuous support of Israel ([UNSC Report](#)). Petro exposes the structural hierarchies that constrain global governance and make humanitarian relief increasingly impossible. Much of the UNSC and its most influential members continue to embody an outdated and unjustifiable system of domination within the post-1945 order ([Hindawi, 2021](#)). This composition perpetuates a form of embedded inequality, where the capacity to define legitimate intervention remains monopolised by those historically responsible for global violence. Petro's call thus transforms moral outrage into an institutional indictment of the international system itself.

Hindawi ([2021](#)) situates such critiques within a broader postcolonial debate, arguing that R2P has been historically narrated as a Western product, thereby erasing Southern agency. Her reading echoes Aníbal Quijano's ([2000](#)) concept of the coloniality of power, which posits that modernity and the nation-state system emerged from colonial plunder and racial hierarchies. Moreover, these legacies endure in contemporary humanitarian governance, where sovereignty and protection remain unequally distributed. Furthermore, Dunford ([2025](#)) expands this argument, contending that while Hindawi's framework ([2021](#)) is de-Westernised, it is not fully decolonised, as it fails to confront how the modern state itself—rooted in colonial violence—reproduces exclusion. This insight links the struggles of Gaza and Latin America: both embody the persistence of colonial boundaries, where sovereignty is exercised by dominant actors while marginalised populations remain vulnerable within the state.

Ultimately, Petro's intervention reframes R2P as a project of decolonial solidarity rather than Western paternalism. By invoking historical memory and moral responsibility, Latin America and the wider Global South articulate an alternative humanitarianism—one grounded in equality, justice and collective protection rather than hierarchical intervention ([Deciancio et al., 2024](#); [Bellamy, 2010](#)). This evolving discourse seeks to restore the credibility of international norms not through Western authority, but through the shared moral agency of formerly colonised nations determined to redefine the meaning of protection in global politics.



V. Conclusion

Colombian President Petro's September 2025 address to the UN General Assembly crystallizes a fundamental challenge to how humanitarian protection operates in practice. His invocation of R2P for Gaza exposes three interconnected contradictions: the persistence of imperial gatekeeping despite Southern contributions to R2P's codification; the historical parallels between Latin American and Palestinian dispossession that ground decolonial solidarity; and the transformation of humanitarian language from a tool of Western legitimation into an instrument of Global South accountability. Petro's call for an "army of countries that do not accept genocide" is not merely rhetorical—it demands a structural reckoning with who holds the authority to define protection and whose suffering counts within international law.

However, this challenge raises urgent questions about the future of humanitarian governance. Can R2P be genuinely decolonized while remaining embedded in institutions like the UN Security Council, where veto power perpetuates the very hierarchies it claims to transcend? If former colonial powers continue to monopolize decisions about intervention, does the doctrine retain any credibility beyond serving geopolitical interests? And perhaps most critically: what happens when the Global South's "army of countries" rejects not just selective application but the legitimacy of the system itself?

Gaza becomes a test case for these tensions. If the international community remains paralyzed while Petro and other Latin American leaders demand accountability, will this catalyze a broader realignment where formerly colonized nations develop alternative mechanisms for collective protection outside Western-dominated institutions? Or will their challenge be absorbed and neutralized, reaffirming that despite decolonial critique, imperial power still determines the boundaries of justice? The answers will reveal whether R2P represents a universal commitment to human dignity or merely the latest iteration of humanitarian intervention as colonial practice—and whether Petro's challenge marks a turning point or simply exposes an unbridgeable gap between principle and power.

2285 words



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