There is nothing in international relations that dictates international society will naturally progress from one generation to the next. To understand such thinking one has only to go back to the scepticism found in Martin Wight’s view of progress in international relations. For Wight, the anarchical realm dictated that progress in the international sphere was inherently more problematic than in the domestic sphere.¹ As a result, the reality is that just because the R2P was unanimously endorsed in 2005, it does not mean that the R2P is here to stay. Notably some went as far as claiming that the R2P was in fact dead in February 2011 because of the perceived slow response to the atrocities in Libya,² only for the subsequent UN Resolutions (1970 and 1973) to lead advocates to conclude the R2P is actually ‘alive and well’.³ The relevance of this debate is that one can see that in a post-R2P world, policymakers will not only be confronted by the real life challenge of mass atrocity crimes but will also be bombarded by a variety of voices offering alternative ways for framing the R2P crimes of genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing. As discussed in Chapter 1, this may lead policymakers to treat genocide as just another insoluble problem. Because of this, the chapter re-engages with the three traditions. To return to the idea of theoretical pluralism, the ES views IR as a three-way conversation between the traditions of realism, rationalism, and revolutionism.⁴ As raised in Chapter 3, each tradition conceptualises the issue of genocide prevention in a different light. The aim of this chapter is to utilise the understanding that has been developed over previous chapters to re-engage with the realist, rationalist, and revolutionist perspectives regarding genocide prevention in a post-R2P world.
The realist voice

Having outlined the central tenets of realism in Chapter 2, let us move straight into assessing the classical realist position. To do this, I consider Henry Kissinger’s opposition to NATO’s intervention in Kosovo in 1999 for reasons to be discussed below:

The abrupt abandonment of the concept of national sovereignty … marked the advent of a new style of foreign policy driven by domestic politics and invocation of universal moralistic slogans … Those who sneer at history obviously do not recall that the legal doctrine of national sovereignty and the principal of non-interference-enshrined in the UN Charter – emerged at the end of the devastating Thirty Years War. … Once the doctrine of universal intervention spreads and competing truths contest we risk entering a world in which, in G. K. Chesterton’s phrase, ‘virtue runs amok’.5

The statement is important for it encapsulates a number of realist concerns that relate directly to the prevention of genocide: (i) the meaning of sovereignty and its relationship with international order, (ii) the lack of moral foundations at the international level, and (iii) the threat of humanitarian intervention sparking a great war.6 Furthermore, the fact that these issues were raised prior to the R2P allows us to analyse how the R2P may have eased or exacerbated realist fears since.

In an attempt to deconstruct this multifaceted argument let us first consider the meaning of sovereignty and its relationship with international order. From an ES perspective, the problem with Kissinger’s approach is that it ties the moral value of order to a set of fixed principles: state sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-intervention, whereas the reality of international relations is that principles such as sovereignty are not static and does in fact change over time.7 From this perspective, it is important to consider that the R2P does not represent an ‘abandonment of sovereignty’ (to use Kissinger’s phrase) but instead asks signatories to understand legitimate sovereignty as conditional rather than absolute.8 Traditionally, such understanding leads realists to claim that international normative commitments such as the R2P erode state sovereignty. Yet a dialogue on this particular issue needs to emerge as one can offer the exact counter-argument. If anything, the consensus that underpins the R2P seems to provide a more informed and grounded understanding of sovereignty which is legitimated via a collective understanding of what is legitimately acceptable and unacceptable in