

United Nations Peacekeeping Operations: Ad Hoc Missions, Permanent Engagement

Edited by Ramesh Thakur and Albrecht Schnabel

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What a difference a decade makes. In the early 1990s, the United Nations seemed to emerge with a new lease on life after almost 50 years of Cold War paralysis. Buoyed by its successive and successful state-building operations in Namibia and Cambodia, as well as its pivotal coalition-building role in the 1991 Gulf War against Iraq, the United Nations appeared poised to occupy a central position in the so-called new world order.

Just over 10 years later, this lofty aspiration lies in tatters, and, in retrospect, appears to have been the product of extreme naïveté and groundless idealism. Botched efforts to keep or enforce peace in Somalia, Bosnia, Rwanda and Sierra Leone have purveyed the near-universal impression of the United Nations as an impotent, weak and perhaps even irrelevant actor on the international stage. In recent months, the UN's relatively low profile in the wake of the September 11 terrorist attacks against New York City and Washington, DC, and the subsequent US-led war in Afghanistan has done little to dispel this image.

This new era of self-doubt and shaken credibility provides the backdrop for an edited volume published by the United Nations Press that critically assesses the string of recent failures in order to draw lessons for future peacekeeping missions. The sobering nature of the task undertaken in *United Nations Peacekeeping Operations*, edited by Ramesh Thakur and Albrecht Schnabel,

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both of the United Nations University, is clearly reflected in the volume's subtitle, *Ad Hoc Missions, Permanent Engagement*. In their effort to glean as comprehensive an evaluation as possible, the editors cast their net widely. They include essays written not only by academic analysts of peacekeeping but also by some of the practitioners who have been intimately involved in the missions that the project places under a microscope.

Thakur and Schnabel divide the volume into four sections. The first contains four essays that broadly depict the challenges of post-Cold War peacekeeping. In the second section three essays survey regional experiences with peacekeeping missions. The four essays in the third section review various aspects of some of the most prominent recent peacekeeping operations, those of Cambodia, the former Yugoslavia and East Timor. The two essays in the final section review the overall post-Cold War record of UN peacekeeping and judge efforts by the United Nations to learn from its prior mistakes.

Forming the analytical core of the volume is the set of challenges posed to the United Nations by the changing axis of global conflict in the post-Cold War world. During the era of US-Soviet bipolarity, UN peacekeeping missions involved the dispatch of small numbers of minimally armed forces from neutral countries to monitor ceasefires between rival nation-states that had consented to the missions' insertion.

The demise of the Cold War has prompted a shift in the locus of global conflict. The post-Cold War period has witnessed a dramatic decline in the frequency of interstate wars and a concurrent spike in the number of civil wars. Consequently, the three cardinal tenets of Cold War peacekeeping—minimal armament, impartiality and consent—have become anachronistic. Instead, UN forces have been faced with the contrary task of humanitarian intervention: the forcible insertion of heavily armed troops into states experiencing ongoing civil conflict, often in the absence of the consent of all the warring parties, in order to create and maintain peace where none existed previously. In the words of Thakur and Schnabel, UN troops have “assumed the role of an active participant in internal conflicts.”

Also, in the case of outright failed states such as Cambodia and Somalia, UN personnel have been burdened with the responsibility of acting as an interim central government for juridical nation-states whose political institutions have completely collapsed. This shift has placed the United Nations in a twofold dilemma. Currently, the United Nations is being pressured to do much more in a growing number of places, even as rising doubts about its effectiveness shrink its available resources. Although a staggering 42 of its 55 peacekeeping operations have been undertaken since the end of the Cold War, the UN's annual peacekeeping budget has actually diminished in recent years, dropping from \$3 billion to \$1 billion between 1995 and 1998.

While the book's 13 essays cover an enormous amount of ground, three important and recurring themes emerge: one normative, the second institutional, and the third geopolitical. First, the shift away from traditional peacekeeping raises thorny normative quandaries. In their essay, "Peacekeeping and the Changing Role of the United Nations: Four Dilemmas," Margaret Karns and Karen Mingst claim that the phenomenon of humanitarian intervention "constitutes a fundamental change in international law" and necessitates "returning to the question of what moral purposes call states to use force, particularly in the difficult case of using force because of the domestic character of another state's conduct and policy."

The critical question of when, if ever, to violate the sovereignty of a nation-state torn by ethnic conflict, genocide, civil war and/or state collapse could not be more divisive. As Karns and Mingst report, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, whose unanimous support is necessary for the dispatch of any humanitarian mission, are at loggerheads on this matter. The United States, Britain and France generally support the idea of humanitarian intervention (in theory, if not always in practice), while China and Russia zealously protest the violation of national sovereignty under virtually all circumstances. The intractability of this problem is magnified by the view shared by many developing countries that humanitarian inter-

vention constitutes little more than a euphemism for neo-colonialism.

Even those who share in the belief that humanitarian intervention is justifiable must confront an equally contentious normative conundrum, namely, the decision of where and when to intervene. A number of essays in the volume broach the potentially explosive question of whether prevailing norms predispose the UN to react expeditiously to civil and ethnic strife in some regions, while thoroughly ignoring such strife in others. Thakur and Schnabel observe that many developing countries have taken note of the "huge discrepancy between political support and financial and military resources committed to conflicts in Europe as compared to Africa." Even a cursory comparison of the UN's efforts to stave off genocide in Bosnia and Kosovo, as opposed to its egregious neglect of the same sort of mass murder in Rwanda, bears this out.

A second recurrent theme is the need for institutional reform. Many of the essays point to glaring flaws in the organizational structure and mandate of the United Nations as they relate to peacekeeping, recommending various ways by which the United Nations can more expeditiously and effectively respond to crises. Some of these are practical and viable. For instance, Michael O'Connor advocates the creation of a professional UN military staff under the control of a military advisor who would be directly responsible to the secretary-general. He further recommends that future peacekeeping mandates and rules of engagement be more directive than specific, thereby providing the special representatives and force commanders in the field more operational autonomy. Other recommendations, however, border on quixotic. For example, in his essay, "The Politics of UN Peacekeeping from Cambodia to Yugoslavia," Yasushi Akashi claims that in order to mount successful peacekeeping operations in the future, "unity of outlook among the major powers, including the permanent members of the Security Council, is highly desirable and necessary."

Meanwhile, other contributors focus on the set of institutional problems associated with the unsettled division of labor

between the United Nations and other transnational actors. Both S. Neil MacFarlane and Mark Malan, in their analyses of regional peacekeeping operations in the Newly Independent States (NIS) and Africa respectively, express ambivalence about the prospects of regional institutions' lightening the peacekeeping load of a resource-stressed United Nations. McFarlane concludes that attempts by the NIS to conduct independent peacekeeping missions in their own backyard have "evinced serious problems relating to impartiality, [have] reflected strongly the perceived self-interest of the regionally dominant power, and [have] been less constrained by international norms regarding peacekeeping." Malan warns that Western proposals for the creation of a standby all-African peacekeeping force to deal exclusively with any instability arising on that continent are illusory, as such a force would "have to be supplemented and complemented by a much larger force for the conduct of multifunctional peacekeeping tasks once there are sufficient security guarantees."

Similarly, Karns and Mingst touch on the implications for UN legitimacy of the humanitarian interventions conducted by other institutional actors such as NATO and of the proliferation of nongovernmental organizations, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, which operate in areas afflicted by civil war. In all the above cases, the authors argue that the devolution of responsibility to other institutional actors promises to lighten the demands on UN resources but imposes an inevitable toll on UN credibility.

The final major theme covered in the volume is the relationship between geopolitical realities and the effectiveness of UN peacekeeping operations. Virtually all the authors grope either explicitly or implicitly with the question of whether the UN can be an effective force for resolving global conflict only when it hitches its wagon to the United States, the world's sole remaining superpower. Virtually all the authors begrudgingly answer this question in the affirmative. According to Karns and Mingst, the United States is "almost indispensable" to UN interventions, as it is the only country possessing the "logistical and techno-

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logical capacity to engage in complex peacekeeping operations and enforcement activities." Given this state of affairs, the UN's enormous dependence on the United States means that in practice, it will only be capable of intervening effectively in places where America's national interests are perceived to be at stake, such as in Bosnia or Kosovo. Conversely, it will be impotent in the face of crises that lie on or beyond the periphery of those interests, such as in Rwanda and Sierra Leone.

If the United Nations is merely an instrument for bestowing the veneer of international legitimacy on selfish US foreign policy behavior, then the organization will simply be cast aside when it threatens to create more problems than it solves as a legitimating device for the American hegemon. This was the case in Kosovo, where the United States sidestepped the United Nations entirely and chose to intervene under NATO auspices. This was done in order to avoid an inevitable veto of the prospective application of military force against Serbia in the Security Council by Russia and/or China.

In sum, *United Nations Peacekeeping Missions* is an extremely comprehensive overview of the challenges confronting the UN in its continuing effort to mitigate global conflict and instability. As a prescriptive work, however, the volume is only partly satisfying. The contributors do present a number of reasonable (and some not so reasonable) tactical-level prescriptions for improving the on-the-ground performance of future peacekeeping missions. However, with regard to more fundamental issues, the authors are conspicuously silent. Although they describe the ponderous normative, institutional and geopolitical obstacles that lie in the path of dramatically improved UN performance, they refrain from offering any profound or creative suggestions as to how those obstacles can be potentially surmounted. As a result, the reader is left with an array of potential band-aids but absolutely no hope for a miracle cure. ♣

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