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Reviewed by Emilian Kavalski (University of Western Sydney)

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Institutionalizing Peacekeeping

The end of the Cold War was expected to usher in an order premised on peace and international cooperation. Such a framework was to be maintained by the practice of international law, and any tensions between opposing states were to be resolved through diplomatic means under the arbitration of the United Nations. Such a vision, however, was almost immediately blasted into oblivion by the proliferation of violent conflicts that accompanied the independence of the former Soviet republics and the dissolution of former Yugoslavia. More importantly, the uncertainty and confusion exhibited by the United Nations in addressing the reality of such intrastate (as opposed to interstate) conflicts cast doubt on not only its effectiveness but also its viability as an international organization capable of conflict prevention and conflict resolution. In particular, the failure of the United Nations to act decisively to stop the genocide in Rwanda and the ethnic cleansing in its “safe havens” in Bosnia appears to have dented the belief of many a commentator that the United Nations has any meaningful contribution to make to the resolution of the complex conflicts of the twenty-first century.

In this respect, Lise Morjé Howard undertakes the difficult task of demonstrating that despite such a negative experience, the United Nations still makes important peacemaking contributions across the globe. Her endeavor offers invaluable insights into understanding the dynamics that facilitated the institutionalization of peacemaking as the appropriate policy response to civil

conflicts. It should be mentioned at the outset that it is a rare pleasure to come across a volume with the investigative breadth and theoretical scope as the one written by Howard. Her book illuminates the United Nation’s notions and practices of peacekeeping in the post-Cold War period. The volume, therefore, is not simply a reassessment of extant analytical frameworks, but an inspiring mapping of the politics, policy, and practices of peacekeeping. Howard’s contention is that peacekeeping is an ongoing, long-term process of continuous reiteration of the necessity of peace. As she points out, there is nothing inevitable about such a process; instead, it is the continuous willingness of participating parties to find a negotiated settlement that frames the peace process. However, more often than not, it is the role of external actors to provide reassurances, assuage suspicions, and, if need be, steer the parties involved on the path of nonviolence (even if their relationship remains conflictual).

In this respect, peacekeeping is a contingent and dynamic process, which depends on mutually supportive actions and the collaborative efforts of multiple agents, each of whom brings special expertise and experience to the process. In the United Nation’s case, successful peacekeeping usually depends on the confluence between several key factors: “the consent of the warring parties, the make-up of the field mission, troop contributors, Secretariat headquarters, and the Security Council. Without appropriate support from all these elements, missions will be unable to deploy to the field, much less

begin to learn once they arrive” (p. 329). This is an important acknowledgment as it lends clarity to what constitutes the nexus of peacekeeping and success in the United Nation’s involvement in civil wars. More significantly, it highlights the need to deepen our conceptual understanding and analytical approaches to account for the challenges of peacekeeping in complex and violent environments.

Howard’s assessment of the United Nation’s effectiveness in the field indicates that it depends on “first-level organizational learning,” which is “a crucial component in determining success and failure in peacekeeping operations” (p. 20). In this context, “first-level learning” indicates “the ability of the UN Secretariat operations to learn during the process of implementing peacekeeping mandates;” as opposed to “second-level learning,” which refers to “learning at UN headquarters” (p. 14). Although mutually reinforcing, such a bifurcated view of the dynamics of organizational learning allows Howard to elaborate sophisticated criteria for measuring the success and failure of different UN missions. In this respect, she is quite unabashed in identifying the flaws of UN peacekeeping, both as a concept and as praxis. The instances of Somalia, Rwanda, Angola, and Bosnia are given as blatant examples of failure. The analysis is explicit about the contextual differences featuring in all four conflicts. Consequently, failure reflects a complex combination of factors. Nevertheless, Howard demonstrates empirically in each of the cases that it is neither the lack of consent of the conflicting parties, nor the disagreements among the permanent members of the Security Council, but the general “organizational dysfunction” of the UN peacekeeping operations that precipitated failure (p. 21).

The volume, however, is not an instance of reckless United Nations-bashing. Howard’s intention is to demonstrate that despite these profound failures, the United Nations has nevertheless managed to learn from this experience and adapt its peacekeeping mechanisms so that it provides a more constructive presence in a conflict situation. It is in this respect that the volume

provides one of the more circumspect analyses to date of the concept, practices, and challenges of peacekeeping. Howard devotes six chapters to the peacekeeping successes of the United Nations in Namibia, El Salvador, Cambodia, Mozambique, Eastern Slavonia, and East Timor. Each case instances the adaptations undertaken by the United Nations to ensure both peace and its own viability as an international actor. Each of these chapters undertakes an appraisal of the idiosyncratic situational factors, the Security Council interests, and the implementation of mandate by the UN mission. Such a parallel assessment of different peacekeeping missions creates a vibrant account of the resilience exhibited by the “multidimensional peacekeeping operations” (p. 299).

Apart from these central cases, Howard investigates the experience of UN peacekeeping in Burundi, Congo, Cote d’Ivoire, Haiti, Kosovo, Sierra Leone, and Sudan. These instances demonstrate the uneven nature of the United Nation’s organizational learning, especially in light of its extensive experience in the field. Moreover, they indicate the increasing politicization of peacekeeping in the context of a global war on terror. As Howard indicates, “it is not the situation of increasing civil wars that is driving international efforts to end them, but rather a decision on the part of international actors to end civil wars, in part because such conflicts could pose a threat to international peace through enabling terrorist activity to flourish” (p. 324).

In this respect, Howard’s volume illuminates the contexts and process of institutionalizing peacekeeping as a central feature of the United Nation’s policy toolkit for conflict resolution. Such a valuable contribution to the study of peacekeeping will benefit both the student and practitioner of international relations. Howard’s ability to gather such a wide range of perspectives and experience makes her effort worthwhile, and the volume will therefore be very useful to anyone dealing with or keen to learn about the complex dynamics of peacekeeping.

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