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International Relations Theory and the Study of UN Peace Operations – Concluding Reflections

Mats Berdal

Abstract:

UN peace operations have, since their inception, touched on core issues and concepts at the heart of the study of international relations: conflict and cooperation; sovereignty and intervention; norms and norm diffusion; the use and utility of military force; and the changing character of armed conflict. To study UN peacekeeping, therefore, is also to study international politics and, by extension, to engage in debates about the bases for international order and the prospects for international society. Although the scope and scale of UN peace operations have evolved over time, the study of UN operations needs to factor in not just discontinuities but also important elements of continuity in the history and practice of UN peacekeeping. The experience of UN operations is rich, diverse and multi-layered. The investigation and deeper understanding of that experience are certain to benefit – as the present volume demonstrates – from the application of different theoretical lenses and a range of methodological tools.

International Relations Theory and the Study of UN Peace Operations – Concluding Reflections

Mats Berdal

International Relations as a Crossroads

In a short but typically incisive survey of the field, written at a time when the so-called “inter-paradigm debate” (Banks,1985) in International Relations (IR) was still generating as much heat as light, Philip Windsor insisted that “far too much scholarly time [had] been wasted in disputes about what actually *is* the field of International Relations” (Windsor, 2002:18). Indeed, the absence of an agreed intellectual base or a unifying method led him to question whether IR could usefully be “spoken of as an academic discipline at all”. He did not, however, view this as a source of weakness or, as others were inclined to suggest, evidence of immaturity in the development of a comparatively young discipline. Instead, he maintained that International Relations was best understood as a “crossroads which takes into account various forms of human thought which may range from psychology to law, from anthropology to nuclear strategy, and which at the same time helps us to relate questions arising from those subjects to each other in a way which the traditional demarcation disputes in universities in the past have not enabled us to do (Windsor,1993:62)”. Thus conceived, diversity in methodological approach and multiplicity of theoretical perspectives were, potentially, sources of strength to be welcomed. IR scholars, Windsor insisted, should be viewed, and should see themselves, as engaged in a discourse, not in the fruitless search for “paradigm shifts or paradigmatic unity”.

This embrace of methodological pluralism and of IR as a discourse is also how the role of IR theory should be viewed in this book - a book whose central aim is “to understand UN peacekeeping through different theoretical lenses”, and to apply these in ways that cast new light on how and why UN peacekeeping “as an international institution, has evolved in a particular direction and functions the way it does”(Oksamytna and Karlsrud, 2010:4 and 1). The notion of incommensurability of competing paradigms at the heart of Thomas Kuhn’s influential idea of the paradigm was one reason why Windsor found its utility limited when it came to the study International Relations, and this may also explain why none of the authors in the present volume use the term. Instead, they see themselves as drawing on broad “theoretical traditions” and “programmes” that do not necessarily form coherent bodies of thought, and within which there are often several strands, but which can nonetheless generate

critical questions and help illuminate under-studied and neglected dimensions of the UN's rich and multi-layered peacekeeping experience. Thus, as Marion Laurence and Emily Paddon Rhoads persuasively demonstrate, the “constructivist toolkit is well-suited to answering questions about how UN peace operations interact with the communities that host them (Laurence and Paddon Rhoads, 2020: 87).” Similarly, Charles Hunt cogently draws on “a loose constellation of ideas and principles” from the field of complexity theory to bring out how “complexity thinking calls for an acceptance of uncertainty and greater modesty around what external intervention can achieve by design (Hunt, 2020:145-146)”.

Now, the conception of IR as cross-roads, where forms of human thought meet and scholars engage in a discourse, raises a further consideration when it comes to the study of UN peacekeeping *within* the field of IR. Specifically, it suggests that the charge (alluded to by the editors at the outset of this volume) that writings on peacekeeping have been “largely a-theoretical” or “theory averse”, concerned largely with questions of “effectiveness”, require qualification. While the charge, arguably, carries some weight in a narrow technical sense, there is in fact a long and important tradition of prominent IR scholars taking a keen interest in UN peacekeeping as an institution, bringing their own theoretical interests and perspectives to bear on the subject, even though, as Oksamytna and Karlsrud perceptively note, their “application has often been implicit rather than explicit”. In terms of understanding the evolution and functions of UN peacekeeping, its place in international politics and international society, the writings of Inis L. Claude Jr., Adam Roberts and Alan James, to mention three of the most important IR scholars that have taken a sustained interest in the subject, remain indispensable (Claude, Jr.1961; James,1990; Roberts,1995). Critically, their work is of continuing relevance, deriving its strength, in part, from the insistence, whether explicit or implicit, that the character and evolution of UN peacekeeping is inseparable, and therefore cannot meaningfully be studied and understood apart, from international politics itself. In the case of Alan James, an influential member of the English School of IR, his writings on peacekeeping – often combining detailed studies of individual operations with larger questions raised by those operations – are especially notable, and certainly cannot be said to emanate from a “theory-free zone”.

Beyond the fraternity of IR scholars, one might add, are other writers whose reflections have also shed an incisive light on UN peacekeeping, even if their arguments have been advanced in “idiosyncratic”¹ fashion and the theoretical implications of their writings

¹ Oldrich Bures quoted in “Introduction” by Oksamytna & Karlsrud,2020.

have been more implicit than explicit. Noteworthy among these is Conor Cruise O'Brien who, while certainly no IR scholar in the strict sense, advanced the compelling and memorable thesis, drawing upon his own experience of peacekeeping in Congo, that the UN is best “seen as a *theatre* in which people improvise versions of contemporary history, posture before the world, let off steam, and occasionally devise rituals that can save the peace (O'Brien, 1994:p.86).” To O'Brien, “myth and ritual” were absolutely central to the workings of the UN and its activities, including peacekeeping (O'Brien, 1968:298). It was an insight which, in interesting ways, foreshadowed many of arguments and perspectives highlighted by “theoretical lenses” applied in this volume.

UN Peace Operations and International Relations: sources of continuity and change

UN peace operations may be defined broadly as the deployment of military and police contingents, drawn from Member States and authorised by the Security Council, in a third-party capacity to mitigate, contain and help create the conditions for overcoming violent conflict within the international system. As such, they have been undertaken in a wide variety of historical, political and geographical settings. Over time, UN peace operations have also come to include a seemingly ever-expanding range of mandated tasks, from the monitoring of ceasefires and buffer-zones at one end, to DDR, the administration of war-torn territories and the protection of civilians at the other (de Coming and Peter, 2019). Historically, UN operations have also witnessed a marked shift in the balance of deployments away from interposition in conflicts between states to operations in intra-state or civil war-like settings, frequently of a violent or, to borrow the jargon, “semi-permissive” kind.

Whether viewed as an institution or a set of activities, it is clear from this brief distillation of the range, scope and evolving character of UN peace operations that they raise large and important questions in IR terms. Indeed, since their inception, UN operations have touched on core issues and concepts at the heart of the study of international relations: conflict and cooperation; sovereignty and intervention; norms and norm diffusion; the use and utility of military force; and the changing character of armed conflict. There is a real sense, in other words, that to study UN peacekeeping is also to study international politics and, by extension, to engage in debates about the bases for international order and prospects for international society.² Thus, when UN peacekeeping first emerged in the 1950s, it

² Hence the connection drawn, often explicitly, in several studies of UN “interventionism” in the 1990s to the larger IR debate about whether or not the post-Cold War international order was moving in a solidarist, as

represented a functional adaptation of the UN to the realities of the Cold War: a distinctive form of third-party intervention involving the deployment of lightly equipped troops aimed at stabilising local conflicts in order to avoid their escalation to major war between rival power blocs. With the passing of the Cold War, as normative boundaries shifted and the State seized to be the sole referent object of security, the scope and transformative ambition of UN peacekeeping expanded accordingly. Although the peacekeeping disasters of the early 1990s – in Angola, Somalia, Bosnia and Rwanda – were followed by a temporary retrenchment in the pace of deployments, from the 1999 onwards UN operations witnessed renewed growth, now with a more explicit focus on the protection of civilians as a core mandate of peacekeepers.

Now, it is evident from the above and, indeed, from the many excellent contributions to this volume, that the scope, scale and focus of UN peace operations have evolved over the time. And yet, while attention has rightly been devoted to the theme of change in much recent scholarship, there are still good reasons why approaches to the study of UN field operations need to factor in not just discontinuities but also key elements of continuity in the history and practice of UN peacekeeping. Four such elements merit special attention when the vistas of future research are explored.

First, in critical respects, the defining characteristics of the UN organisation itself – specifically, its inter-governmental, deeply political and functionally fragmented character – remain fundamentally unchanged. Given the UN's central role in authorising, mounting and sustaining field operations, this reality matters greatly. While commentary on the UN's role in world politics easily slips into the language of “the UN did this” or the “UN failed to do that”, its *actual workings* as an organisation must always take account of the fact that it is a *membership* organisation, not a supranational body or world government-in-waiting. The implications for UN peacekeeping are many. Accounting for and understanding the behaviour of troop contributing countries (TCCs) – including why unity of command and coherence of strategic effort on the part of UN peacekeepers have frequently proved so elusive – is only one area, albeit an obvious one, where politics and intergovernmentalism are key to explaining outcomes.

Second, elements of continuity are also evident when it comes to the questions around the role and function – and the discussion of these both among Member States and within the

distinct from a pluralist, direction. See, in particular, James Mayall (ed.), *The New Interventionism, 1991-1994: United Nations Experience in Cambodia, former Yugoslavia and Somalia* (Cambridge: CUP, 1997).

Secretariat – of the defining principles of UN peacekeeping; that is, the requirement of consent of the parties, impartiality as the determinant of operational activity, and minimum use of force except in self-defence. Although it is undeniably the case that consent has frequently proved partial and incomplete in contemporary mission settings, and also that the UN has been applying force more “robustly” than in the past (Karlsrud, 2018), Member States and the Security Council have been reluctant – for an admixture of principled and pragmatic reasons – to jettison the underlying commitment to UN peacekeeping as an *essentially* consent-based activity in favour of enforcement or war-fighting. The offensive mandate given to the Force Intervention Brigade (FIB) in the DRC has proved an exception rather than a harbinger of a new era. Applying the core principles has proved especially challenging in volatile settings where the threat to civilians has been high, leading the 2015 High Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations (HIPPO) to call for their “flexible and progressive interpretation” (HIPPO:32). The role of force in peace operations, especially as it bears on the implementation of POC mandates, remains a major challenge and is certain to spawn further academic work and reflection. Yet, there continues to be a recognition, including by the HIPPO, that the core principles sketched above will always play a key function *as long as* UN peacekeepers are engaged in activities of a “secondary” rather than “primary” kind, that is, as long as their activities are “dependent, in respect of both [their] origins and success, on the wishes and policies of others” (James, 1990:1).

Third, the actual experience of the UN peacekeepers during the era of so-called “classical” or “first-generation” peacekeeping, is richer and more varied than is often recognised. The Congo mission from 1960 to 1964 is of particular interest, highlighting, as it quickly came to do, the inherent difficulties of inserting and operating an outside military force in a third-party capacity in the midst of an ongoing civil war.³ Other operations, too, notably in Cyprus and Lebanon, brought the challenges of peacekeeping and humanitarian relief in the context of internal conflict into sharp relief. None of these operations can be said to have been exhausted in research terms.

Finally, UN peacekeeping must be understood and analysed against the background of significant continuities in the nature of international politics and the sources of state

³ The experience of Congo, quite apart from nearly breaking the back of the organisation, also generated a significant body of high-quality literature on UN peacekeeping. See, for example, D. K. Bowett, *UN Forces – A Legal Study* (London: Stevens & Sons, 1964); Rosalyn Higgins, *UN peacekeeping, 1946-67: Documents and Commentary* (London: OUP, 1969); Inis Claude Jr, “The United Nations and the Use of Force”, *International Conciliation*, No. 532, March 1961; and special issue of *International Organization*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 1963; *The Oslo Papers* (Oslo: The Norwegian Institute for International Affairs, 1964).

conduct. Specifically, considerations of interest, power and prestige continue to matter greatly to states. As Cunliffe usefully reminds us in his exploration of realist theorising in this volume, UN peacekeeping simply cannot be divorced from an appreciation of the continuing of power of power politics (Cunliffe, 2020).

The Value and Future of Theorising

The present volume admirably brings out the value of applying different theoretical lenses and methodological tools to enhance our understanding of the “changing character of peacekeeping and the emergence of new concerns, models and tasks (Oksamytna and Karlsrud:4)”. Some of the perspectives presented cast a new and more searching light on what has long been understood about the essence of peacekeeping, to wit, that it is “a deeply political activity rather than [merely] a technical policy instrument” (Bode, 2020:96).⁴ Other contributions, including the exploration of gendered power relations within institutions engaged in peacekeeping, promise important new perspectives on the subject (Holmes, 2020). Similarly, Sarah Von Billerbeck shows how a sociological approach and ethnographic research into UN field operations offers potentially penetrating insights into “the practices, policy choices, and failures of UN peacekeeping” (von Billerbeck: p.74).

As these and other contributions make clear, theorising is necessarily an iterative process and the value of different theoretical lenses to our understanding of peacekeeping depends, in the end, on the extent to which they draw upon, are tested and refined in light of rigorous empirical investigations of actual operations, whether contemporary or historical.⁵ Without this, debates around theoretical perspectives and approaches always run the risk of becoming self-referential, or worse, self-indulgent. Fortunately, the increased availability of new primary source material⁶, the growing number of illuminating accounts by practitioners (e.g. Goulding,2002;Gharekhan,2006;Guéhenno,2015;Doss,2020), the recognition among

⁴ For a thoughtful discussion of the “intrinsic political aspect” of UN peacekeeping, see James, 1996.

⁵ On a lighter note, the reference to different “generations” of peacekeeping made at the outset of the present volume (Oksamytna and Karlsrud:7) brought to mind a call I made upon Cedric Thornberry, then Head of Civil Affairs for UNPROFOR headquartered in Zagreb, in the spring of 1993. It had been a bad day for UNPROFOR and although Thornberry had agreed to meet with me, he was plainly sceptical of much of the writings on peacekeeping then in vogue. When I mumbled something about “second generation peacekeeping”, he quickly cut me off with: “yes, and fifth generation removed from reality”.

⁶ See, for example, valuable material relating to Rwanda and former Yugoslavia, collected, declassified and made available by the National Security Archive (NSA), <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/project/genocide-documentation-project>

scholars (evident in this book) that theorising cannot be separated from the detailed study of actual operations, and, not least, the very fact that UN operations themselves continue to be in demand; all of these ensure that the UN peace operations will remain a most fertile territory for theorists and practitioners alike for many years to come.

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