Changing the Polarity: Peacekeeping in a Multipolar world

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***Introduction***

There has been much anxious commentary on the foreign policy of the Trump administration and speculation as to how far the ‘America first’ slogans of the campaign trail last year will be translated into policy, with the risk of undermining the global efforts of the United Nations (UN) in its various domains of activity, including its vast array of peacekeeping operations. There has also been discussion of whether China will use its growing wealth and power to make good any shortfalls in US support to global peacekeeping and development. Yet however unexpected Donald Trump’s electoral victory over Hillary Clinton’s internationalist platform, and whatever the gyrations in policy of the Trump administration, there are deeper transformations at work in the international system – emergent multipolarity and renewed geopolitical rivalries – of which the Trump campaign and administration are more symptomatic than causal. Theoretically grasping these deeper trends and considering historical precedent for such changes should, therefore provide a better guide to analysing the long-term prospects for international peacekeeping in place of ‘White House watching’ or poring over the latest statements of the US ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley.

It is well-known that peacekeeping boomed in the post-Cold War era as the geopolitical rivalries of the prior period abated, allowing the UN Security Council to empower a swathe of peacekeeping and military interventions. Over 80 per cent of UN peacekeeping missions were launched since 1988, and the number of blue helmets deployed globally multiplied over seven-fold across the 1989-94 period. Today, the UN deploys more peacekeepers to combat zones than even the US’ much-vaunted and enlarged global military complement. Indeed, commentators routinely discuss both the UN and US global military systems in terms of ‘over-stretch’. Yet the significance of this complementarity of these twin global military deployments, and of the prior shift in power that made the diffusion of both US and UN forces possible, has never been properly considered in peacekeeping studies. Instead the prior, structural transformation of the international system has been left deeply buried, assumed to be a safe conceptual bedrock for the modern study of peacekeeping. Fixated on the outcomes of peace operations, students and scholars of peacekeeping have ignored the tectonic plates shifting beneath their feet, while IR scholars have rarely deigned to consider what the remarkably elaborate and resilient superstructure of global peacekeeping operations might tell us about underlying power relations within the international system. If we are indeed on the brink of a redistribution of power within the international system from a unipolar to a multipolar configuration, then judging by the effects of the last such redistribution of power, the potential implications for peacekeeping are profound. The stakes for peacekeeping scholarship are no less profound, for if such structural shifts are not incorporated into our analyses, then a prolific body of scholarship may have been built on a foundation of shifting sand, its basic concepts, assumptions, models, theories and findings all limited and conditioned by an ephemeral underlying distribution of power.

If bipolarity inhibited the development of peacekeeping and unipolarity stimulated it, what will the era of multipolarity bring? This papers seeks to broach this discussion. It does this by considering what IR theories would lead us to expect about patterns of peacekeeping production under different distributions of power, and by providing an ideal-type analysis of peacekeeping in these different power configurations. In order to broaden the available base of evidence beyond the blue helmet era, this paper reaches further back than the Cold War, which is too often taken as the point at which to truncate the study of peacekeeping. Instead, the clock begins in post-Napoleonic Europe, with the Concert system that was inaugurated in 1815. If we are willing to count more than just blue helmets as peacekeepers, and to consider institutionalised cooperation in international security prior to the founding of the UN, then we can see that the League of Nations pioneered efforts to manage conflict, with its own military deployments despatched to the Saarland and even the Amazon rainforest long before Dag Hammarskjöld and Lester Pearson deployed blue helmets to Suez. The Congress system of early nineteenth century Europe was an even more active in terms of multilateral military interventions, once again under conditions of multipolarity. The paper argues a) that the impact of multilpolarity on peacekeeping depends on great power cooperation in conditions of multilpolarity; and b) that multipolarity is highly likely to erode the legitimacy of peacekeeping over time, with potentially ambivalent effects on the use and effectiveness of peacekeepers.

While the pay-off for the study of peacekeeping in this paper should be significant, there should also be a pay-off for IR more generally. If peacekeeping is a by-product of unipolarity, then this should help us flesh out our understanding of how unipolarity functions – a power structure that is widely seen as the most under-theorised of the various possible distributions of international power. More broadly, comparing multinational operations across different systems of polarity should enable us better to understand patterns of cooperation in international security, with the historical dynamics of peacekeeping providing a useful test of IR theory.

***Outline of the Argument***

The discussion proceeds in five parts. First, I identify some problems with peacekeeping studies resulting from the lack of a structural perspective informed by IR theory. Scholarly debates on peacekeeping thus remain limited by being sequestered in peace and conflict- as opposed to security studies. Across the next two sections we consider more systematically the advantages of a structural perspective for peacekeeping studies, as well as how the study of peacekeeping may help improve IR theory. Then we consider what IR studies of different international systems might lead us to expect about peacekeeping operations, before shifting to examine some of the history. This is done by providing an ideal-type analysis (Lebow, 2008) of four different periods with different polarities: 1815-1914, 1919-39, 1945-1988 and 1988-2018. Thus we are dealing with two periods of multipolarity, one of bipolarity and one of unipolarity. Narratives and typologies of peacekeeping and peacekeeping development frequently if not exclusively classify peacekeeping by reference to its internal features – the complexity of mandate, mission size, etc. – and rarely to macropolitical conditions, let alone systemic configurations of power, frequently result in confusing overlap. The discussion below thus also offers up a new typology of peacekeeping, generated by the underlying systemic distribution of power rather than by reference to what peacekeepers do or how they do it, in the field. Summarising the preceding analysis, the penultimate section of the paper discusses what we might infer about the development of peacekeeping and international security under conditions of future multipolarity.

Figure 1: Conceptualising the Relationship between Systemic Distribution of Power and Peacekeeping (arrows represent lines of influence)

War and Conflict

A

Systemic distribution of power

D

C

State willingness to contribute to international military expeditions

B

This paper is primarily aimed at explaining B and (to a lesser extent D), perhaps offering a few thoughts on A and C as well.

***IR Theory and Peacekeeping: A promise unfulfilled***

It used to be said that there was a lack of theory in peacekeeping scholarship (Paris, 2001). That would no longer be an accurate description of the field. The search for robust generalisation has boomed as more peacekeeping data has become more available. The study of peacekeeping has also tracked the intellectual pluralisation of international studies, with critical, post-structural and postcolonial perspectives all infusing the kinds of studies that are conducted and questions that are asked of peacekeeping. Yet despite this wide variety of approach and method, there are some hidden assumptions that are shared across the field and that mean the scholarship in this area is particularly ill-suited to confronting the challenge of a multipolar international system.

Firstly, despite demands raised by Paris some years ago, peacekeeping remains disconnected from IR theory, in the sense of engaging explanations that are rooted in theoretical expectations taken from IR accounts of state and systemic behaviour. This reflects many aspects of peacekeeping studies that make it difficult to adapt to traditional IR theorising, most notably the orientation of peacekeeping studies towards explaining the outcomes of field deployments. The analogous focus would be say, if security studies pivoted to studying the outcome of specific battles on war, rather than the dynamics of war and security competition that led to wars.

Needless to say, all IR theories remain Western-centric in their focus, which means that the ‘small states’ that are either peacekeepers or are the peacekept suffer from lack of attention. Conceptual difficulty also attaches to the fact that peacekeeping occupies the grey zone between war and peace, making it difficult to use binary distinctions to relate to overall measures of ‘stability’ at some systemic level. The shift in focus of peacekeeping from conventional wars between states to civil conflicts that are peripheral (in the sense that they do not involve shifts in either the regional or global balance of power) further means that the study of peacekeeping suffers from the enduring focus on great or major powers in IR. Finally, the scaling up of peacekeeping into multidimensional operations, neo-trusteeship and peacebuilding mandates – also inverts the basic unit of analysis in IR, effectively turning the state inside-out, making it a receptacle of the international system rather than taking the system as a product of state interaction. All of this makes theorising peacekeeping through the lens of IR theory more difficult.

On the ‘supply side’ of peacekeeping, the fact that the UN assembles significant military forces for the purpose of conflict reduction does not readily fit with alliance theory in explaining why states participate in peacekeeping, nor indeed liberal institutionalist accounts of the UN, that tend to focus on the great power bargains that underpin the establishment of international organisations, an area that is many steps removed from peacekeeping. Indeed, given the self-proclaimed conceptual proximity of liberal institutionalism to structural realism, it is perhaps surprising that there has been no systematic study of peacekeeping from within the former perspective, given that peacekeeping is clearly a liberal enterprise that seeks to institutionalise patterns of security cooperation, and thus would seem to be an ideal opportunity to knit together insights from different theoretical perspectives together.

While there have been calls for analysis of geopolitics in peacekeeping (Paris, 2014), few have taken up the challenge – when it has been done, it tends to be restricted to foreign policy studies of interventionist behaviour by rising states – thus remaining at the ‘second image’ level of analysis, e.g., Brazilian peacekeeping in Haiti, Chinese rescue operations in Libya (Cunliffe and Kenkel, 2015; see further below). Even cognate fields, such as the study of humanitarian intervention and the responsibility to protect for instance, has failed properly to link to the study of peace operations. English School / international society approaches have remained focused on a handful of cases of intervention and non-intervention – e.g., Kosovo, East Timor, Rwanda, Somalia, Darfur – despite the fact that issues of military intervention, changing understandings of sovereignty and consent, not to mention military protection for humanitarian purposes, are played out in many more countries under blue helmet mandates than the handful of cases that form the staple of humanitarian intervention debates. As we shall see further below, this lack of conceptual integration is a problem not only for peacekeeping scholarship, but also for IR too, which has not only failed to consider how peacekeeping has become such an important component of international security, but has also failed to concretise expectations about the operation of collective security efforts under different distributions of power within the international system.

If these are the reasons for the lack of integration between IR theory and peacekeeping studies, what are the problems that flow from this failure to link up the two fields? The first and most glaring problem is that so much peacekeeping scholarship is built on the post-Cold War period – a problem that is shared across methods and theoretical approaches to the field. The classic cases of peacekeeping failure and success – Rwanda, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Somalia – are from the 1990s. Similarly, quantitative studies perforce derive the majority of their observations – conflict years or violence against civilians with peacekeepers present or absent – from the post-Cold War era, as this is the period in which the effect of peacekeepers in field operations reaches sufficient quantities with sufficient variety and complexity of mandate so as to make large-N studies feasible over long periods of time. Moreover quantitative studies require the data to be homogenised to draw such inferences; whatever qualitative distinctions that may exist between Cold War-era and post-Cold War era peacekeeping operations, they will be captured in terms of ordinal variables such as mission size, rather than conceptual distinctions to do with the global balance of power for which the conceptual tools do not exist to attribute causality. Similarly, the study of varieties of peacebuilding in the critical vein – liberal versus hybrid models, for example – is also restricted to the last thirty years if not indeed the last twenty, as this is when peacebuilding became institutionalised and differentiated in policy and practice.

The common condition of all these studies is a unipolar system, with quantitative and qualitative growth in peacekeeping coinciding with US victory in the Cold War. There is no variable that can directly capture the effects of polarity on the behaviour of peacekeepers. This means that potentially all generalisations about the precise impact of peacekeepers on rates of the recurrent conflict or violence against civilians, or the imposition of liberal peace, are all bundled together as artefacts of unipolarity. If unipolarity could change, so too the findings and insights of these streams of research would simply crumble away without any understanding of what happened.

The significance of this has never been properly appreciated in the study of peacekeeping, with the evolution of peacekeeping from the Cold War era being presented in teleological vein as a natural by-product of deepening global governance rather than say, the possible by-product of a variable distribution of power. This implicit evolutionary bias is very clearly displayed in the stylised facts about peacekeeping that are rehashed are various studies, in which Cold War peacekeeping is presented as the ancestor of peacekeeping today. Here, the story moves in a simple unilinear fashion in which peace operations multiply and evolve from small to large, from simplicity to complexity, from homogeneity to functional differentiation and specialisation as they adapt to a more complex international environment (Murphy, 2003; Bellamy and Williams, 2010).

If, on the other hand, major differences in peacekeeping across the eras are in fact explicable by differences in the structural distribution of power, then we cannot safely assume that peacekeeping will continue to evolve as part of the growing complexity of global governance. If the security structures of global governance are contingent on unipolarity, a change away from unipolarity will reverberate throughout the superstructure of global governance. This possibility necessitates a drastic shift in our analytical optics, in which the future of peacekeeping may resemble the past more closely than the present. At the very least, we may no longer treat peacekeeping as if it is driven solely by the logic of its own internal development towards an implicit end goal.

The second characteristic of peacekeeping scholarship that would be improved by a structural perspective is its dyadic character. By this is meant that peacekeeping analysis usually has two poles – the actor and acted upon, the peacekeeper and the peacekept. Both categories may involve multiple agents – say, different UN agencies and bodies on the one hand, and militias, armed factions, different ethnic groups on the other – but most studies remain bifurcated in this mould. This is symptomatic of their being trapped within a second image level of international relations, in which the focus is at the level of the state or impact on the state, occasionally straying perhaps to the first-image level of analysis when considering how peacekeepers affect the calculations of individuals or examining the impact of peacekeepers in specific sub-national areas (Waltz, 1959). The fact that we are dealing with a second-image level of analysis is perhaps disguised by the blue banner of the UN giving us the impression that we are treating of international, multilateral issues – which of course, we are, but *not* structural or third-image issues – at least not in most peacekeeping scholarship. On the ‘supply side’ of peacekeeping, studies that capture the politics of peacekeeper participation remain rare and in any case, remain restricted to the ‘second image’ level, failing to consider how the third image may condition second image-level effects.

Finally, a structural perspective will help to continue the project of treating peacekeeping as a matter of politics – another promise on which the study of peacekeeping has failed properly to deliver many years after Sandra Whitworth raised it (Whitworth, 1995). While critical scholarship has brought the question of power relations and ideology to bear in the study of peacekeeping, most of this is caught up in criticising the liberal peace model of post-conflict reconstruction, for variously restricting the range of policy and institutional outcomes, for failing to integrate the consent of the peacekept, and so on. It does this by analysing the institutions and discourses of control, manipulation, restriction and presupposition that attach themselves to peacekeeping efforts (Richmond, 2014). Yet to restrict the study of politics in peacekeeping to critique of the liberal peace would be to still to leave the ‘most basic questions of politics’ unanswered – who benefits, and why? While liberal peace has developed a sophisticated range of tools to study how peacekeeping may exercise control over the peacekept, the question of who benefits has been left underexplored – perhaps an effect of the Foucauldian inspiration behind many recent studies of liberal peace, and studies of critical political economy that take for granted the notion that capitalism disproportionately benefits some at the expense of others. By introducing third-image considerations regarding the global balance of power underpinning military intervention, we can recall that power should also be understood as relating to conflicting state interests rather than being merely a disembodied effect of shifting discourses.

***Blue Helmets in the Battlefield of IR Theory***

The potential benefit of this intellectual exchange is not all one-way. Not only can structural theorising help us improve our understanding of peacekeeping, but peacekeeping can also help us improve our understanding of power politics. If peacekeeping is a by-product of institutionalised great power cooperation, this is an insight into great power diplomacy and efforts to collaboratively manage conflict. As realist theories expect that sustained international cooperation in the realm of security will be the least developed, peacekeeping remains an intriguing conceptual chimera. This is true both from realist perspectives that discount the viability and effectiveness of international conflict management, and from the viewpoint of institutionalist perspectives that examine cooperation in non-security based realms, such as the economy or environment. Although security and strategic studies scholars have certainly registered ‘small wars’ as being of intellectual interest – such as analysing the place of Iraq and Afghanistan in US grand strategy for instance, or considering how US military failure in these countries may impact the credibility of US power – peacekeeping remains under-analysed, not least perhaps because since the 1990s, they rarely, if ever, involve even major powers, let alone the US (Stokes, 2009).

In his widely-read piece ‘The False Promise of International Institutions’ John Mearsheimer discounted peacekeeping operations as irrelevant to international security given that blue helmets would never be able to stop war between major military powers (Mearsheimer, 1994-95). Hopes placed in peacekeeping to recreate collective security were therefore misguided. Mearsheimer was right of course, that even the most heavily armed blue helmet mission deployed in the largest numbers, armed with the most advanced weaponry and ‘robust’ mandate would be unable to defeat or deter say, Russian forces in the Caucasus, Israeli forces in Lebanon or an Indo-Pakistani war over Kashmir. Yet not only has peacekeeping proliferated under unipolarity so that it is comparable only to unipole’s global military footprint, it has also become an integral part of major powers’ military operations. Both UN and AU peacekeepers support French and US operations in the Sahel and Horn of Africa, respectively. Mearsheimer’s misgivings notwithstanding, the extent of peacekeeping requires explaining from within a structural perspective, too. Peacekeepers should allow us to infer and think about degrees of cooperation in international security. Furthermore, as the history of peacekeeping shows, the wars that peacekeepers are involved with, even if they are peripheral from the strategic or structural perspective, can nonetheless constitute significant theatres for great power rivalry, not to mention being grossly destabilising to regional subsystems of the international order and horrifyingly lethal and destructive, even when they don’t impact the global balance of power.

Peacekeeping operations have thus unduly suffered the scorn of IR theorists and security studies scholars. This is not only because of the great power bias of IR theory, but also because peacekeeping seems to embody the hopes of liberal idealism to restrain war. In this paper, I hope to show that this intellectual scorn is unwarranted and that the history of multinational military intervention and peacekeeping is intellectually stimulating and informative for those seeking to understand patterns of rivalry and cooperation in international security. Also, given the much vaunted strangeness and rarity of unipolarity as discussed in the literature, if peacekeeping *is* associated with unipolarity, then this study may help us to better conceptualise and concretise how unipolar systems function in security matters (Monteiro, 2011/12). Plus, as we shall see below, given the significant disagreement in the literature regarding the war-proneness of different types of system, identifying the role of peacekeeping within these systems may help to further clarify how international security functions in these different systems. In short, plugging peacekeeping into IR theories should energise scholarly understanding both ways, expanding, deepening and improving the quality of peacekeeping studies and IR. Table 1 below summarises the consensus of the current literature regarding the impact of different distributions of power on peacekeeping.

***Peacekeeping Theory under Conditions of Unipolarity***

While there has been a growth in literature examining why countries contribute to peacekeeping this tends to be of the mid-range rational choice kind. While they have established plenty of stylised facts about the dynamics of peacekeeper states in the aggregate, they are not, properly-speaking, IR theories of peacekeeping in that that they do not organically connect to pictures of wider international order. They therefore offer little by way of predictive power about behaviour under changed conditions of international order. In one of the first such mid-range studies, David Muellenbach argued that IR theories were too wide-ranging to be amenable to empirical arbitration in this domain – while he simultaneously failed to distinguish between levels of analysis (Muellenbach, 2005). Whatever the effects of different distributions of power may be that are jumbled up in the assumptions of the model and statistical operations on the data. Thus although the time period in question may cover different distributions of power no effort is made to attribute independent causal effects to these changes as these models are indifferent to structural assumptions growing out of IR theory. Indeed, perhaps we might even go as far as to say that the indifference to such questions is itself an artefact of unipolarity, in as much as structural distributions of power do not impinge upon our consciousness as an important factor is itself reflective perhaps of a world in which power was so concentrated that it could be taken for granted. One might argue that these theories conflate second and third images, taking unipolarity as the default assumption and assuming all states’ interests automatically flow from this.

What IR-inspired analysis is there out there? Laura Neack’s self-professed realist analysis of participation in peacekeeping is a second-image / state-level analysis, without considering third-image or structural effect (Neack, 1995). While there is a strain of democratic peace theories, by their nature these tend to collapse third-image effects into the second-image. The plausibility of such theories was strengthened by the long tail of third-wave democratisation effects, but as geopolitical rivalry and authoritarian resilience have reasserted themselves, there is clearly the need to consider possible structural effects on international peacekeeping. Regardless, the fact that these theories explicitly discount structural effects in their explanations means that we need not consider them in any detail here.

The major strand of theorising in this domain in IR terms is public goods theory that analyses peacekeeper contribution as a collective action problem, tacitly building on hegemonic stability theory (the underlying assumption being public goods require or are at least facilitated by a hegemon / unipole, e.g., Sandler, 2017). None of these studies have any variable that captures the effects of different distributions of power on provision of a collective good such as peacekeeping. The other problem is the assumption common to these studies that failure to contribute is a sub-optimal outcome among rational utility maximisers; an assumption that also requires a long set of corollary assumptions, e.g., that peacekeeping is effective at the systemic level (and not merely in say, protecting civilians in sub-national areas), that states genuinely perceive conflict anywhere as a systemic problem or threat to which peacekeeping is an adequate response, and so on (Cunliffe, 2013). Another striking omission from these studies is any serious effort to systematically conceptualise peacekeeping as a global public good – the assumption seeming to be that peacekeeping belongs by default to the overlapping area of a Venn diagram comprising NATO on the one hand and the UN on the other. Yet it is far from clear that public goods analysis of NATO burden-sharing, for instance, can be easily scaled up into a global model, particularly when the global organisation in question would encompass the constituents of a multipolar order.

Thus, if summarising the tacit assumptions in the literature about the impact of different distributions of power on peacekeeping, we could stylise these responses as follows, in which the relationship between multipolarity and peacekeeping remains a gap in the literature.

Table 1: Overview of distribution of power and peacekeeping

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Systemic Distribution of Power** | **Impact on Peacekeeping Operations** |
| Bipolarity | Inhibits Peacekeeping |
| Unipolarity | Stimulates Peacekeeping |
| Multipolarity | ? |

***Constructing a Structural Perspective on Peacekeeping***

What should structural approaches about the polarity of the international system tell us about peacekeeping? As we have already seen, some analysis of the effect of polarity is already present in peacekeeping studies when describing the effect of the end of the Cold War on peacekeeping. As we shall see below, Norrie MacQueen in particular sought to apply what he called a neorealist perspective to peace operations, although his effort was uneven in terms of theoretical consistency, drawing more on a functionalist outlook than neorealism per se, with peacekeeping portrayed as the blind, homeostatic responses of a system seeking self-correction (MacQueen, 2006). Whatever we may think of MacQueen’s conceptualisation of peacekeeping, it is not, properly speaking, neorealist in a consistently meaningful sense.

On the other side, as studies of polarity in international relations usually concern the impact of different distributions of power on state’s security behaviour (e.g., alliance-seeking, enhanced arms expenditure, acquiring nuclear weapons, etc.) they give us little ready expectations of peacekeeping-style behaviour. Added to this, there is little agreement across the literature with respect to whether different systems of polarity are stable or conflictual. Classical realists felt that the potential for shifting alliances drastically tilting the balance of power in multipolar systems helped induce caution among states competing between themselves, while neorealists assume that the potential for miscalculation and therefore war is exacerbated under multipolarity (although notoriously Waltz holds that these effects could be leavened by the proliferation of nuclear weapons, Waltz, 2008). William Wohlforth holds that unipolarity should be peaceful, Nuno P. Monteiro thinks conflict is highly likely under unipolarity (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2008; Monteiro, 2011/12).

There is also disagreement over characterising past systems. Was the nineteenth century unipolar as a result of global British supremacy, or bipolar until 1856 after which genuine multipolarity developed following the defeat of Russia in the Crimean War and the rise of Prussia-Germany? On top of this there is disagreement on how to assess what kind of systemic transformation is occurring at the moment, if indeed such a transformation is occurring at all. Are we entering a multipolar world, or indeed an ‘apolar’ or non-polar world (Haas, 2008)? Will unipolarity continue given the drastic extent of US power, particularly measured in military terms? Developments such as the economic collapse and concomitant political turbulence in Brazil and South Africa, Russian economic strain under the effect of sanctions and low oil prices, and the vast array of problems confronting Turkey and Nigeria, should put paid to any expectations of a radical over-turning of the international power structure. The consensus is that the BRICS have crumbled, leaving only China and India, with Russia struggling against the under-tow of economic weakness and demographic decline. By the same token however, we do not need to infer that the US needs to be directly supplanted, or indeed that any country reach strategic parity with the US, for multipolarity to exist: previous eras of multipolarity have seen significant disparities in power between great powers. Multipolarity could emerge even with a relative erosion of US power.

Finally, the predictive powers of these systemic analyses is modest – they offer predictions about behaviour once the system is fully extant and functioning, but cannot predict behaviour in transitional phases. Plus, they give us little insight into what a transition might look like, or how we might know at what stage of a transition we might be. With respect to peacekeeping for instance, peace operations may provide excellent, internationally sanctioned camouflage for rising powers to flex their military muscles: China’s deployment of military forces to peacekeeping operations in Mali is the first time Chinese troops are deployed in combat since the Sino-Vietnamese War of 1979. In other words, emerging powers’ participation in peacekeeping at the moment may reflect behaviour specific to transitional eras rather than allowing us to draw long-term inferences about the behaviour of states under conditions of multipolarity.

Waltz himself admitted that the effects of one system may linger into the other, giving the 1956 Suez War as an example of systemic correction, when former great powers acting as if they inhabited a multipolar world learned that they in fact inhabited a bipolar one. All of this makes drawing inferences about the impact of power structures on peace operations more difficult. To further complicate the picture, there are clearly multiple effects at work in the deployment of peacekeepers, with multiple analytical layers interceding between the underlying power grid of any particular international system, and military deployments, e.g., the explosive growth of the states system over the last 200 years, alongside the growth and thickening of international institutions and, of course, the development of nuclear weapons.

The following sections explore the dynamics of peacekeeping under different systems of polarity / distributions of power. Such a study raises several issues not least the question of anachronism. How meaningful is it to assimilate the vast range of military interventions and expeditions over the last 200 years into ‘peacekeeping’, an institution so tightly bound to a particular type of deployment – blue helmets – by a specific international organisation – the UN. On the other hand, as we shall see, de facto peacekeeping operations – that is to say, multinational forces deployed under the formal authority of an international organisation with non-national insignia – began with the League of Nations’ Leticia operation in South America in 1935. The men who devised both the League and the UN did so with self-awareness of historical precedent, evolution, and diplomats at the 1919 Paris peace treaties looked back to the Congress of Vienna, while also frequently ending up informing the foundation of the UN. For these reasons, it does not seem overly crude to see the last 200 years of the modern international system as being an integrated historical cycle with strong elements of continuity as well as innovation.

***Peacekeeping under Multipolarity I: 1815-1914***

In their textbook on peacekeeping, Alex J. Bellamy and Paul D. Williams cite the Congress of Berlin as part of the lineage of peacekeeping, presumably due to the fact that it involved major agreement about extra-European intervention. Historical studies of humanitarian intervention all look to the nineteenth century, too, as the precursors of today’s post-Cold War interventions (Klose, 2015). The tale of international organisation usually begins with the post-Napoleonic Concert system of nineteenth century Europe. Taken together, it makes sense to begin the study of peacekeeping here, too.

This era saw military interventions under multilateral sanction to root out the slave trade, defend the rights of Christians in the Ottoman Empire (Greece, several Russo-Turkish Wars), and within Europe, interventions to crush liberal and national insurrections (the Italian states, Spain). The mutual agreements laid out in the post-Napoleonic era enabled such interventions to go ahead, because it was understood that they fulfilled proscribed aims (counter-revolutionary suppression) and thus did not threaten other powers’ spheres of influence. Although the formal Congress system of regular, institutionalised cooperation broke down fairly early (by the mid-1820s), the overall multipolar power structure and balance of power could be said to have remained intact until the unification of Germany in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

Table 2: Multilateral Operations in the First era of Multipolarity, 1815-1914

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Years** | **Number of Great Powers** | **Number of Operations** |
| 99 | 6 | 8 |

***Peacekeeping under Multipolarity II, 1919-1939***

The short-lived multipolar era of the Twenty Years’ Crisis saw not only the growing formalisation of international cooperation, but also innovations in the direction and purpose of multinational military intervention: the establishment of mandates in the imperial territories of the defeated Central Powers, directly instituted international rule (Danzig), and plebiscitarian peacekeeping, in which multinational observers and military detachments oversaw territorial revision, aligning borders with various ethnic and national groups. Under the UN, plebiscitarian peacekeeping would only return significantly later, and even then with regards to referenda on peace agreements rather than ethnically-based territorial revision. League peacekeeping would also penetrate into Latin America with the intervention in the Chaco War (1935) – the next round of peacekeeping in the region only coming at the end of the Cold War, with UN missions in Central America. The Leticia mission in the Amazon has a better claim to being the first ‘proper’ peacekeeping mission than even Suez: League forces deployed under League insignia, with explicitly interpositionary aims to help monitor a ceasefire line (MacQueen, 2006). This was also the era of great power peacekeeping, with great powers routinely involved in League operations (France, Britain, Italy).

This is also a period in which great power competition also becomes ideological, and in which such competition is tripolar (liberalism, fascism, communism), but contained within the League, at least until the outbreak of renewed great power war. Anti-liberal states successfully exploited liberal hypocrisy for their own ends, with Nazi Germany attacking the lack of self-determination given to ethnic Germans as a result of the Paris peace treaties, and the USSR seeking to use the League to buttress itself against central and eastern European fascist states.

Table 3: League Operations in the Second Era of Multipolarity, 1919-1939

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Years** | **Number of Great Powers** | **Number of Operations** |
| 20 | 7 | 8 |

***Peacekeeping under Bipolarity, 1945-1990***

Typically the formation of UN peacekeeping is attributed to the Cold War sabotaging the operation of collective security as envisioned in the Charter and UN Military Staff Committee. This led in turn to the practical innovation both from within the UN itself and some adroit middle power diplomacy by Canadian foreign minister Lester Pearson in 1956. Yet it was superpower coordination, in jointly criticising the Anglo-French intervention, and the shift to the UN General Assembly with the Uniting for Peace procedure, that established peacekeeping. Indeed, it was superpower rivalry that disabled peacekeeping in Belgian Congo, as attempts to escalate UN intervention in that country’s botched decolonisation turned into a Cold War clash, which in turn led to bitter Soviet denunciations of the UN Secretary General and the withdrawal of their dues for UN peacekeeping. In other words, great power cooperation is a sine qua non for peacekeeping. The ambition, scale and size of the Congo mission has frequently drawn comparison to post-Cold War peacekeeping and rightly so. The failed ONUC mission could justly be seen as over-ambitious global governance undergoing systemic correction, succumbing to bipolarity much as the multipolar delusions of Paris and London succumbed to the realities of bipolarity in 1956, when they sought to justify their war on Egypt as a neutral intervention in a regional dispute.

Corresponding with this pattern, a relative relaxation in tensions facilitated UN peacekeeping (Unyom, in Yemen, 1963-64), as well as facilitating it in areas of low superpower conflict or interest (e.g., Cyprus, Unficyp, 1964-). Détente peacekeeping also enabled further missions in the Middle East following the 1973 war (Unef II, Undof) and Lebanon (Unifil). Renewed tensions during the second Cold War in the 1980s led to shifts to regional or ad hoc peacekeeping, until the Cold War started to decline (see further below). A structural analysis of peacekeeping allows us to better understand why one region in particular, the Middle East, absorbed so many peacekeeping missions compared to other parts of the world. The Middle East was the fulcrum of Cold War-era peacekeeping. The reasons for this include that first, it is a regional sub-system that develops relatively early – across the 1930-40s – with the independence of various League mandate territories and withdrawal of colonial power, thereby multiplying borders but also resulting in a great power vacuum (compare this with Latin America, that developed independent statehood earlier, but fell into the US sphere of influence earlier, too). Thus great power rivalry over a contested region of (newly) independent states, whose affiliation was mixed or up for grabs, seems to have been a precondition for UN military expansion in this period. Great power coordination is thus a clear prerequisite of peacekeeping and is evident in the pattern of Cold War peacekeeping.

Table 4: Peacekeeping under bipolarity, 1945-1988

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Years | Number of Great Powers | Number of Operations |
| 43 | 2 | 14 |

***Peacekeeping under Unipolarity, 1990-2018***

As in the Cold War, so in the unipolar period there is an ebb and flow to the patterns of peacekeeping deployment. The early Cold War period is marked by great power entry into peacekeeping, with permanent members of the United Nations Security Council entering peacekeeping in both the Balkans and the Horn of Africa, signalling a major break with the neutralist and Non-Aligned peacekeeping protocols of the Cold War period. Most notoriously, there was US deployment to Somalia in the early 1990s, but also Franco-British deployments to Unprofor in the Balkans. MacQueen in particular has drawn attention to the dissolution of spheres of influence as a prerequisite to the expansion of post-Cold War peacekeeping, while others have drawn attention to the internationalisation of military intervention in which peacekeeping became a way of supporting, supplementing and enabling peacekeeping (Charbonneau, 2012). The comparative harmony that emerged on the UN Security Council, with far lower rates of veto, are also a clear prerequisite for expanded peacekeeping operations. Thus peace operations could expand from the Middle East to the battlefields of the hot Cold War – Angola, Mozambique, Cambodia, Somalia, Afghanistan, Central America (MacQueen 2006). To be sure, while unipolarity coincides with almost complete global decolonisation – thereby removing imperial barriers to external conflict management in the periphery – it is also the lack of spheres of influence under unipolarity that facilitated peacekeeping. Crucially, the end of the Cold War also enabled not only the geographic broadening of peacekeeping into former great power spheres of influence, but also its deepening too, expanding far beyond patrolling demilitarised zones on conflicted borders as per ‘classical’, Cold War-era peacekeeping, to the expansive programmes of societal engineering in many of the African missions of today. Consensus over the most appropriate model of social, economic and political organisation enabled the liberal peace to become the template of multinational post-war reconstruction.

The failures of the mid-1990s missions led to the shift to regional organisations (most notably, NATO in the Balkans) and the collapse in blue helmet deployments until the turn of the century, when UN missions boomed again while the US was embroiled in Iraq, with UN missions in Cote d’Ivoire and Congo. Again, strikingly, UN peacekeeping functioned as a means of restoring harmony on the Council, with extensive Franco-US cooperation over the 2004 intervention in Haiti for example following the fracas over Iraq the previous year, which was in turn rapidly substituted by a UN operation (the now notorious Minustah operation). While total deployment levels fluctuated over the era of unipolarity, diversity of contributors has remained stable, with the balance of contributions tilting overwhelmingly to the developing world, including China – the largest blue helmet contributor of the permanent five on the Security Council.

The dynamics of peacekeeping strongly suggests bandwagoning behaviour, as predicted by Wohlforth on unipolarity. Yet peacekeeping-as-unipolar-bandwagoning has gone largely unnoticed in the literature, suffering from the general lack of attention given to peacekeeping within security studies. Given the way the Cold War ended – with Soviet collapse rather than a redistribution of power through a great power war – no new alliance structures were needed, and the UN could easily be militarised, at least for the scale required to intervene and manage the wars of the periphery. This lack of attention to peacekeeping is strange on the face of it, as it is commonly accepted in debates on international security that US deployments particularly in East Asia are assumed to forestall escalation and aggravation of local security dilemmas, preventing strong balancing effects from locking in at the regional level. Yet the role of UN peacekeepers, politically supported and overwhelmingly funded by the US, receives less attention as exemplifying pacification efforts under unipolarity.

Table 5: UN Peacekeeping under unipolarity, 1988-date

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Years** | **Number of Great Powers** | **Number of Operations** |
| 30 | 1 | 57 |

***Discussion of Findings: Implications for Peacekeeping under Renewed Multipolarity***

* Bipolarity and unipolarity exhibit more peacekeeping or quasi-peacekeeping efforts than multipolarity … although both systems also see greater recourse and functioning of global organisation
* As regards emergent powers, effects here are ambivalent. While China has escalated its involvement in UN peacekeeping as an explicit commitment to part of China’s peaceful rise, India has downgraded its involvement precisely as part of its ascent, trying to cast off the legacy of Nehruvian Non-Alignment where they rub shoulders with weaker and poorer states (Cunliffe, 2013).

Table 6: Overview of distribution of power and peacekeeping

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Systemic Distribution of Power** | **Impact on Peacekeeping Operations** |
| Bipolarity | Stimulates Peacekeeping IF great power cooperation  |
| Unipolarity | Stimulates Peacekeeping  |
| Multipolarity | Inhibits peacekeeping |

***Why peacebuilding will disappear under multipolarity***

Both the theory and the evidence would seem to suggest that the drastic expansion of peacekeeping seen over the last few years is an effect of unipolarity. Part of all this growth is, however, the effect of an optical illusion concerning the gap between power and legitimacy in different contexts. Cold War military interventions were frequently cosmopolitan when measured say, by the degree of different countries participating in them, such as regional allies that supported US intervention in the Dominican Republic in 1965, or the Warsaw Pact countries that supported Soviet Russia’s invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. Yet nobody would consider the multilateral character of these interventions to make them peacekeeping, despite the fact that the claim was made by the US and USSR respectively, in both cases. By the same token, today’s peacekeeping operations involve imposing specific sets of institutions and policies that have no less of an ideological component than the ordering effects of these Warsaw Pact and OAS interventions. Yet nobody would consider peacebuilding operations today to be as brutally coercive as these Cold War-era interventions – nor indeed, as of equal political significance for the international system at large. The crushing of the Prague Spring mattered for international politics in a way that say, complex peacebuilding mandates and reconstruction efforts in Lebanon, Cambodia or Liberia do not.

What accounts for these differences then is not numbers of participating states, claims of upholding or maintaining regional security, or using force to maintain or establish a particular type of social, political or economic order. Multinational military operations intervening to maintain security in peripheral states will continue; peacekeeping, on the other hand, may not, or at least peacekeeping operations may be significantly reduced in number and complexity of mandate. In a multipolar system, we should expect alliances to become more important and political claims to universalism to be correspondingly discounted, undercutting the possibility of the United Nations functioning as a direct expression of global political will. In circumstances of strategic rivalry, grand declamations of universal interest justifying military intervention will not only appear implausible (and therefore effectively redundant), they may also run the risk of repulsing existing and potential allies, garbling strategic intentions and confusing friend and foe alike. Imagine, for example, if the Brezhnev Doctrine had been cast in the language of maintaining universal human rights around the world.

Paradoxically, in a world in which peacekeeping becomes less politically viable it may also become more effective: if multinational military interventions to restore order are pursued under the compulsion of political necessity with genuine strategic stakes (such as to weaken potential rivals or maintain alliance cohesion and overall strategic parity), they are more likely to be pursued more systematically. Unipolar peacekeeping by contrast has been notoriously plagued by lack of strategic interest and political willpower and commitment. Indeed, the growth of peacekeeping has probably exacerbated strategic *disinterest*. The fact that the post-intervention phase of operations can be left to blue helmets lowers the risks and costs of intervention by say, the British in Sierra Leone or the French in Cote d’Ivoire and Mali, or the US in Haiti. Long term occupation or military footprint, or the need for neo-colonialism, unilaterally maintaining protectorates and client states – all such hard political and strategic questions can be effectively outsourced to UN structures in the era of unipolarity. The overall effect is to make military interventions more appealing, reducing the need for strategic reckoning or being forced to take political responsibility for the outcomes of military interventions. Over the medium to long-term then, we would expect multipolarity to whittle away the legitimacy of peacekeeping reducing it back to the scale of the Cold War or even that of the League era. Peacekeeping will wither, and the over-sized and over-resourced Department of Peacekeeping Operations may become akin to the now defunct UN Trusteeship Council, a brass plaque on an empty room.

***Conclusion***

We have come to take peacekeeping for granted – perhaps dangerously so, to the extent that blue helmets are assumed to be the natural way to end a war: peacekeepers are expected for conflicts as diverse as Colombia, Yemen, Syria, perhaps even Ukraine. If we extrapolated current trends – levels of deployment, mandate structure and complexity, operational size, national breakdown of operations – into the future, where would it end? Can we be genuinely confident that global peacekeeping will continue? To do so would be to effectively assume that peacekeeping asymptotically approaches some kind of world state. If do not want to assume this, then we must seriously consider that peacekeeping today is a hypertrophied by-product of unipolarity, and thus we might expect a new distribution of global power to shift the levels and modalities of peacekeeping once again.

Appendix of Pre-UN Peacekeeping Interventions, 1815-1939

* Destruction of the cross-Atlantic slave trade (counted as a single event)
* Intervention in the Ottoman Empire, 1820s, 1870s
* Russian intervention in Hungary, 1848
* Suppression of the Boxer Rebellion, 1899-1901
* Albanian expedition, 1913
* Silesia plebiscite
* Schweslig plebiscite
* Klagenfurt plebiscite
* Allenstein / Marienwerder plebiscite
* Sapron plebiscite
* Danzig police
* Leticia
* Saar

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