



Bulletin

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Power Politics and Peacekeeping

An Interview with Philip Cunliffe

Professor Philip Cunliffe has agreed to discuss power politics and the future of UN peacekeeping with the director of the Centre FrancoPaix, Professor Bruno Charbonneau.

Philip Cunliffe is Senior Lecturer in International Conflict at the University of Kent, which he joined in 2009 after completing his doctorate in War Studies at King's College London. He is the Editor-in-Chief of [International Peacekeeping](#), the leading journal that has set the agenda for research into peacekeeping operations since 1994.

He has written widely on a variety of political issues ranging from Balkan politics to Brexit, with a particular focus on international efforts to manage violent conflict since the end of the Cold War. His numerous publications include [Legions of Peace: UN Peacekeepers from the Global South](#) (2013) and [Lenin Lives! Reimagining the Russian Revolution](#) (2017).

Interview by Bruno Charbonneau

Bruno Charbonneau (BC): During the last Canadian elections, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau promised that his government would contribute troops to United Nations (UN) peacekeeping. Last March, his government announced a prudent commitment to UN peacekeeping. Part of the debate about whether such a mission was judicious for Canada was that UN peacekeeping is not what it used to be. It is not the 'traditional' peacekeeping of the Cold War or even of the 1990s. What can you tell us about the evolution of UN peacekeeping over the last 20 years?

Philip Cunliffe (PC): Generally speaking, peacekeeping has grown more coercive, directive and politically intrusive. It involves larger operations with more personnel, more heavily armed, with more sweeping and extensive mandates to interfere in the political and social life of the country concerned. Peacekeepers also enjoy the presumption of using force in defence of the mandate – that is, in defence of political ambitions of New York – rather than merely in self-defence of the peacekeepers themselves. There are exceptions of course, both in the past and today, but broadly-speaking,



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that has been the trend and evolution of peacekeeping.

BC: Who are today's key players and key troop contributing countries? Why are they invested in UN peacekeeping?

PC: The overwhelming majority of troops come from developing countries, including South Asian and African states – a military dispensation that reflects, as I argued in my book *Legions of Peace*, an imperial legacy. UN peacekeeping has inherited the transnational military structures of the British, and to a lesser extent, the French empires. Leading peacekeeper nations are those nations whose peoples used to constitute the colonial armies of the imperial states, involved in imperial policing around the empires of their colonial masters based in London and Paris. There are exceptions as ever, such as Uruguay, Egypt, Rwanda who are important peacekeepers today, but the pattern on the whole is a remarkable reproduction of inter-war and nineteenth century transnational, imperial security structures, absorbed today into the transnational plane of the UN. The same is true of course, of Canada – a major supplier of manpower for the British empire in the past, even if its peacekeeping efforts today are much reduced. The effect, however, is by and large the same: the nations of the periphery police the international order on behalf of the metropolitan states, allowing them to maintain international order on the cheap with much less cost in blood, treasure and political and strategic risk.

For peripheral states, the major reasons for participation are political rather than financial – the latter still being a pernicious myth about corrupt, greedy, incompetent Third World peacekeepers – a myth designed to flatter Western states, who in turn refuse to deploy their forces in significant numbers to conflict zones. The political reasons for participation vary – participating in peacekeeping operations grants access to developing countries at the UN, but regional security interests, promotion of an international image abroad, managing civil-military relations by exporting peacekeepers, all of these factor into countries' decisions to deploy peacekeepers abroad.

The key players remain, however, the US and Western states who provide the bulk of financing for UN peacekeeping either through the UN itself or through ad hoc and bilateral arrangements, and of course, through their political control of the Security Council. China is a growing force in UN peacekeeping, the greatest troop contributor of the permanent five, veto-wielding members of the Security Council. China has folded peacekeeping into the narrative of its 'peaceful rise' and its claim to leadership of the liberal international order – an authoritarian government at home does not seem incompatible with liberalism abroad! This should give anyone who supports the liberal international order pause. That said, senior peacekeeping posts continue to be held by Western states – France, for example, still monopolises the position of head of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations.

BC: Since the end of the Cold War, pressures to enforce peace and to use ‘robust force’ have always pushed against the limits of what UN peacekeeping is supposed to be about. Since the 2013 beginning of the Mali mission, the pressure is to adopt or adapt to counterterrorism. Debates at the UN Secretariat and published reports like the 2015 report of the High-level Independent Panel on Peace Operations and the 2017 Cruz report have led some to claim that UN peacekeeping is going through an existential crisis. John Karlsrud even argues that the ‘UN is at war’. How do you analyse recent debates about the future of UN peacekeeping?

PC: The core issue for UN peacekeeping is whether the geopolitical compact that has underpinned it since the end of the Cold War begins to fray – for the moment, there seems to be no signs of that. Despite renewed East-West tensions on the Security Council over Libya, Syria and of course Ukraine, the permanent five seem to be content to cooperate in allowing peacekeeping to continue – it still serves everyone’s collective interest to have the UN oversee many conflict zones. Most peacekeeping missions have their missions renewed every six months. This requires unanimity on the Council. The UN continues to do vastly more peacekeeping today than it ever did during the Cold War. The UN has put together an impressive peacekeeping infrastructure over the last thirty years, but its foundations are ultimately rooted in the shifting sands of an evolving international order. Cold War peacekeeping developed in an era of bipolarity, post-Cold War peacekeeping in an era of unipolarity; I do not think UN peacekeeping can be indefinitely sustained in an era of growing geopolitical competition that we can expect in a world of multipolarity. That is the topic of my current peacekeeping research.

BC: Can the new American administration, particularly the views of President Trump, undermine this consensus at the Security Council?

PC: Possibly; the Council just recently failed to agree on renewing the mandate of the UN mission in the Central African Republic, and the Trump administration has still not delivered on its peacekeeping budget. It’s worth remembering however, as research by Lise Morjé Howard has shown, that there is no clear pattern of behavior towards the UN with Republican administrations. Moreover, Democrats in the White House have been just as uncompromising and hostile to the UN as Republican White Houses. It was the Clinton administration, after all, that ousted UN Secretary-General

Boutros Boutros-Ghali after only one term in office, and it was the George W. Bush administration that supported the growth of peacekeeping after 2003 because it was in their interest to ensure that the UN was keeping the lid on conflicts elsewhere while the US was embroiled in Iraq. That was at the time that John Bolton, Trump’s national security adviser, was serving as the US ambassador to the UN.

BC: What is UN peacekeeping purpose in the 21st century? What should it be?

PC: If peacekeeping could be shifted away from soldiers and the high politics of the UN, I think that would be a good thing. Peace efforts should be best left to diplomats and mediators, and made less dependent on soldiers. Furthermore, there are plenty of unarmed civilian missions that are quite remarkably effective in certain circumstances in protecting civilians from marauding militias. To make peace the purpose of diplomacy and civil society once again would be a good thing for the future; that we think of peace now as dependent on the deployment of large military forces as with UN peacekeeping, is a terrible indictment of our international politics, and of the ‘liberal’ international order. Peacekeeping today means a militarized peace.

BC: Professor Michael Pugh was the lead founding editor of *International Peacekeeping* when the journal was established in 1994. In 2004, he wrote an article, entitled ‘Peacekeeping and Critical Theory’, in which he argued that peace operations were a management device that sustain a particular order of world politics that privileges the rich and powerful states. Most importantly, he made connections between the world of practice and research, arguing that peacekeeping research did not question the international politics of peacekeeping as it presumed of the inherent benefits of peacekeeping. What does peacekeeping research look like in 2018? What are today’s links between peacekeeping practice and peacekeeping research?

PC: Peacekeeping research is vastly more critical than it was in the past, at least in the sense that scholarship reflects a wide range of theoretical traditions – critical, feminist, post-structural, cosmopolitan, decolonial and so on. Yet, of course, peacekeeping still privileges rich and powerful states. Part of the issue is that peacekeeping was in some ways already post-colonial – it could only exist on the back

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of post-colonial states willingly reproducing imperial power structures through their incorporation into transnational security regimes built up by the UN since the end of the Cold War. It also increasingly reflects a decolonial world, as rising powers such as India and China seek to exploit peacekeeping for their own geopolitical and even imperial aspirations. Critical theorists have not reckoned with these power structures, retreating into the ether of highly abstruse theories. In the end, even today, many years after Pugh's renowned article, peacekeeping practice still drives peacekeeping research – the questions are overwhelmingly tailored to the demands of policy. What is the most effective form of peacekeeping? How best to protect human rights and women and children? To that extent, critical theories of peacekeeping have in fact fed directly into the 'problem-solving tradition' that Michael Pugh explicitly set out to criticize. Models of hybrid peace for instance – ideas that involve local ideas of peace rather than imposing templates on high from New York – have provided avenues of retreat for liberal peacebuilders to abandon hopes of liberalization and democratization, to fall back on models of 'frozen peace' while patronizing local people about their traditions in place of any transformative vision. Here too, peacebuilders are replicating the imperial shifts of the past, and in particular the shift to so-called native administration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in which imperial rule was off-loaded onto elites cultivated by remote imperial administrators. This time, the theory is being provided by critical scholars.

BC: You keep coming back to the imperial legacies of UN peacekeeping. Yet, examining peacekeeping in Africa, one notices the actualization of the 1990s motto of 'African solutions to African problems.' 21st-century UN peacekeeping in Africa is largely dependent upon the willing participation of—some might say 'own by'—African states and regional organizations. Is this a replication of the imperial past or the evolution of global governance?

PC: Neo-imperial global governance perhaps? The African Union is heavily supported by Western states, politically, strategically, financially and of course through its peacekeeping missions. African peacekeeping operations are subsidized either on a bilateral basis or directly supported through the UN, as with the AU mission in Somalia. It is difficult to overstate the extent to which the African states system is supported by transnational governance structures, to the point indeed where it is difficult to tell where the national state ends and transnational governance begins.

BC: The Canadian national imagination includes the ideal of the Canadian blue helmet that brings peace to the world and, related to that, of a state that contributes to building a better and more peaceful world order. Is there still a role

in UN peacekeeping for a country like Canada? Could a significant Canadian contribution transform current UN peacekeeping debates or trends?

PC: I do not think so. Quite the opposite: I think retreating from peacekeeping and the naïve illusions it fosters, would be transformative for Canada. It would be an opportunity to rethink and recreate a new vision of Canada on the world stage that was not based on the malign vision of being a social democratic lackey of the US, and what is worse, promoting this idea that peace is the equivalent of deploying soldiers en masse. The idea that peace is dependent on force, and that sovereignty is compatible with hosting large armies of foreigners and civilian peacebuilders on one's territory, is one of the most difficult and malign results of global peacekeeping today.

BC: Dear Professor Cunliffe, thank you for your time and comments!

Philip Cunliffe is Senior Lecturer in International Conflict at the University of Kent.



News and announcements

- Adib Bencherif published an article in the journal *Politique Africaine* n°150 entitled "[Le Mali post "Accord d'Alger" : une période intérimaire entre conflits et négociations](#)".
- Bruno Charbonneau attended the Paris Peace Forum at the invitation of Ms. Kareen Rispal, Ambassador of France in Canada. In this context, he participated to the meeting of the Réseau de Réflexion Stratégique sur la Sécurité au Sahel (2r3s) on the theme of "Prevention and anticipation of fragility situations in the Sahel", which was held in the presence of the special envoy of France to the Sahel. He was also invited to the workshop on "New Approaches to Security Sector Reform (SSR) in Sub-Saharan Africa", co-organized by The European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) and the World Bank.
- Niagalé Bagayoko published an article in "Global Brief" on November 30 entitled "[Which African Country can be a Term-Setter? Senegal](#)". She participated in the Dakar Forum for Peace and Security in Africa, where she moderated the conference "[Judicial Systems and Security: What Regional Cooperation](#)". She also participated to the workshop "Security Sector Reform in Sub-Sahara" on November 14, co-organized by The European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS) and the World Bank. She also spoke on [AMEL TV](#) about the Dakar Forum on the democratic governance of security systems.
- Jonathan Sears has published on "The conversation" an article entitled "[On the brink: why 2019 may be another bad year for beleaguered Mali](#)", on december 4. He participated to a Twitter expert panel discussion hosted by [BRACED – UK](#). He was also invited speaker on the theme "Hope and healing : a view from Mali" during [the 3rd Annual Common Unity Event](#) at Menno Simons College Student Association, Winnipeg, Manitoba.
- Maxime Ricard presented on November 22 his doctoral research at the roundtable "[The plurality of security actors in West Africa](#)", organized by CÉRIUM at the Université de Montréal.
- Yvan Conoir participated on December 4 in a networking conference entitled "Humanitarian Interventions - Criticisms, Advances and Challenges", organized by the International affairs committee of the Université de Montréal.

The Centre FrancoPaix in Conflict Resolution and Peace missions aims to promote scientific research, academic training and the development of conflict resolution research in the Francophonie.

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