Lisa Hultman, Jacob D. Kathman and Megan Shannon: Peacekeeping in the Midst of War

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Whenever peacekeeping becomes the subject of conversation, it is hard not to think of the tragic failures of the United Nations' (UN) peacekeeping efforts, such as the notoriously known ones in Srebrenica or Rwanda. The vivid images of innocent civilians being massacred have inevitably become part of our collective memory as citizens of the world. Time and time again, the international community proclaimed "never again", and yet new incidents with devastating consequences occurred on the UN's watch. The widespread post-election violence in Côte d'Ivoire in 2010, the attack on Goma in 2012, and the withdrawal of UNSMIS from Syria in the same year serve as only a handful of examples of this. Can we thus conclude that the UN peacekeeping is utterly ineffective in helping countries ravaged by civil wars? Or would such a sweeping generalisation be largely misguided, given that the UN's successes in this regard are likely to be mere non-events, as no one can remember the war that never happened?

The three authors behind the 2019 book *Peacekeeping in the Midst of War* strive to find answers to these very questions. Lisa Hultman, an Associate Professor and Deputy Head of the Department of Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University, Jacob Kathman, a professor in Comparative Politics and International Relations at the University at Buffalo, and Megan Shannon, an associate professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Colorado, jointly published an impressive piece comprehensively examining the role of UN peacekeeping in active civil war contexts. The authors are renowned scholars in the field of peace and conflict studies, with frequent publications in the field's leading journals, such as the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, the *Journal of Peace Research*, or the *American Journal of Political Science*. The book itself has been well-received in the academic community and beyond, even winning the American Political Science Association Conflict Processes Best Book Award. The book is structured into 7 chapters.

Using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, the authors reveal that peacekeeping indeed has a significant and desirable[1] impact on violence mitigation. Although previous research already found a positive link between peacekeeping and lasting conflict resolution a long time ago (DOYLE – SAMBANIS 2000; FORTNA 2004), the authors make a convincing argument regarding the need to move beyond absolutist conceptions of peacekeeping success – where a mission either fulfils certain criteria or is considered a failure – and propose a relative and continuous measure of

peacekeeping effectiveness. In Chapter 2,[2] the authors identify the short-comings of the current scholarly endeavours in this area, operationalise the key concepts, and outline their innovative approach with such continuous measures at its core. One of the main contributions of the book is the shift in focus away from peacekeeping's ability to maintain peace in a post-conflict setting to its ability to reduce violence when tasked with halting active hostilities, as those are the circumstances under which peacekeeping missions are increasingly deployed. The focal point of the authors' interest therefore lies not with the survival of peace, but with the reduction of wartime violence. The authors argue that even though the peacekeeping missions might fall short of establishing stable peace, they may (and as their analysis shows, indeed do) significantly reduce both battlefield and one-sided violence and thus save many lives that would otherwise be lost.

Furthermore, the authors account for the fact that not all missions were created equal, and include the differences in missions' capacity[3] and constitution[4] in the analysis, indeed finding that the number and type of peacekeepers make a crucial difference to a mission's ability to *pursue* negative peace.[5] The authors rely on rationalist literature that views armed conflict as a bargaining process between the rebels and the government to show how common bargaining problems, namely the lack of information and commitment issues, influence violence[6] in civil wars. They view violence as instrumental; it serves as a means to improve one's bargaining position. In this account, the UN is capable of mitigating violence by alleviating the bargaining problems. A further explanation of the mechanisms of peacekeeping effectiveness is the subject of Chapter 3, which thoroughly describes the causal mechanisms underlying peacekeeping and violence reduction, focusing separately on battlefield and one-sided violence. The chapter also elaborates on the importance of missions' capacity and constitution.

Chapters 4 and 5 constitute the bedrock of the authors' analysis, presenting quantitative models that show the impact of peacekeeping on the reduction of battlefield violence (CHAPTER 4) and violence against civilians (CHAPTER 5). The authors investigate armed conflicts in the post-Cold War era (1992–2014), comparing the intensity of violence in civil wars with UN peacekeeping and without it, using observations for every month to adequately account for the fluctuation in missions' capacity and constitution. The findings in Chapter 4 suggest that as the number of peacekeeping

troops increases, battlefield violence decreases. However, the authors do not find a similar effect for the number of UN police officers or unarmed observers deployed. According to the authors, these findings can be best explained by the fact that military troops are the only type of peacekeeping personnel that is effectively capable of performing activities that can potentially mitigate battlefield violence, namely separating the belligerents, disarming and demobilising the combatants, and verifying compliance with the terms of peace processes. Neither police, who operate behind frontlines, nor observers are fit for such tasks. Moreover, and rather surprisingly, the authors find that growing numbers of observers actually exacerbate battlefield violence as their presence signals a lack of commitment of the international community or, if a more robust mission is in the offing, belligerents may perceive the temporary deployment of observers as the last opportunity to improve their negotiating positions before the arrival of military troops, and therefore engage in violence.

Chapter 5, on the other hand, focuses on civilian victimisation. In this case, the authors find that increases in both military troops and police personnel lead to a decrease of anti-civilian violence. While the mechanisms by which military troops help mitigate victimisation of civilians *close to* the frontlines are akin to those postulated for reducing battlefield violence itself, UN police forces engage in miscellaneous activities *behind* the frontlines, from patrolling civilian communities to law enforcement and training of new officers. All these tools help alleviate violence against civilians by increasing the costs[7] of victimising the population and by impeding access to vulnerable groups. Chapter 5 also finds that unarmed observers are not an appropriate type of personnel when the goal is reduction of anti-civilian violence. For reasons analogous to those given in Chapter 4, the presence of unarmed observers actually increases the numbers of civilian casualties. In summary, the authors find convincing support for the claim that peacekeeping does make a difference to the level of violence in civil wars, and if missions have appropriate constitution and capacity, many lives can be saved.

The authors also perform several robustness checks that increase the reader's confidence in the results. Nevertheless, one aspect would surely warrant more attention: the background into which the peacekeeping operations are deployed. While the authors accounted for factors such as population size, democracy score or the overall deadliness of the conflict,

it would definitely be interesting to see also other variables pertaining to the conflict environment included as controls. For instance, previous research has found links between the size of the government army (QUINN – MASON – GURSES 2007), ethnic cleavages (HARTZELL – HODDIE 2003), or the dependency on natural resources (DOYLE – SAMBANIS 2000) and the likelihood of recurrent violence. Including these control variables could indeed be informative. The quantitative analysis presented in Chapters 4 and 5 is then supplemented with two qualitative case studies (in Chapter 6) of Côte d'Ivoire and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), where the authors demonstrate how the peaks in violence on the one hand and the periods when violence plummeted on the other coincided with the relative weakness or strength in terms of a mission's constitution and capacity. The qualitative analysis supports the quantitative findings.

Furthermore, there are a few directions in which the analysis could have been expanded. First, the book strictly focuses on UN peacekeeping. While the authors make a good argument in favour of excluding state-led interventions, which are often biased, a comparison of UN peacekeeping with missions undertaken by regional organisations would be a welcome addition, as the reader often wonders whether the same conclusions would hold for peacekeeping more broadly or whether they are endemic to the UN.[8] Second, while the authors' investigation of peacekeeping missions on two dimensions[9] – capacity and constitution – is definitely a step in the right direction, it could be argued that the measure of capacity should be a relative one. As became apparent in the case of the DRC towards the end of Chapter 6, it is not only the absolute number of troops or UN personnel that matters, but also the size of the area they must engage in or the population they should protect. Therefore, a variable measuring the capacity as a proportion of the UN personnel to the country population or the area of deployment could further advance the analysis.

Finally, the authors state in Chapter 7 that they *"sought to understand the conditions under which peacekeeping achieves or fails to achieve its goals"* (P. 170). Including a set-theoretic perspective (conducting the Qualitative Comparative Analysis) could add another dimension to the research and help account for the causal complexity inherent in processes pertaining to such complex phenomena as civil wars. Gromes (2019) conducted an intriguing analysis seeking to explain why peacekeeping succeeds in preventing war recurrence in some cases but fails in others. Expanding the analysis

of violence mitigation in civil wars by employing Qualitative Comparative Analysis to reveal the conditions under which violence decreases in all their complexity (discovering pathways consisting of configurations of conditions) could generate further useful findings with potentially vast policy implications, as the necessary and sufficient conditions for alleviating wartime violence would be identified.

Overall, the book is a tremendously valuable contribution to the current academic peacekeeping research as well as the policy-making world. It offers a new perspective on peacekeeping as a tool not only for peace stabilisation, but also for violence mitigation in contexts where war is still raging. With its focus on fluctuation in violence as well as the changes in the capacity and constitution of missions, the book brings a nuanced assessment of wartime peacekeeping and a critical evaluation of its impact. The authors ultimately conclude that peacekeeping works, and their main recommendation that policymakers should acknowledge and take into consideration when planning peacekeeping missions is the importance of an appropriate mission design. In other words, the constitution and capacity matter. Deploying larger numbers of military troops helps reduce battlefield violence, while a deployment of more troops and police personnel helps to significantly reduce violence directed against civilians. These are important findings for academics, policymakers, as well as the public, which generally tends to hold rather sceptical views of peacekeeping effectiveness. The authors presented a remarkable analysis which clearly shows the benefits of wartime peacekeeping and the difference the international community can make if it does not further undercut the UN peacekeeping budget and plans missions in line with recommendations that are likely to be lifesaving. To paraphrase Kofi Annan (UN 1998), although peacekeeping might not have been the answer to every conflict, it can help humanity make its future less scarred by war than its past.

ENDNOTES

1   In statistical terms, this relationship is negative, meaning that as the robustness of a mission increases, violence decreases.

2   Chapter 1 merely provides an introduction to the subject of peacekeeping and civil war and outlines the structure and content of the book.

3   Capacity denotes the number of peacekeeping personnel deployed in a mission.

4 Constitution is conceptualised as *"the types of personnel that are routinely deployed to peacekeeping operations"* (p. 68). Such personnel can fall into one of the following categories: military troops, armed police, or unarmed observers.

5 Galtung (1964: 2) defined negative peace simply as "the absence of violence." For Hultman, Kathman, and Shannon, the focus is on the *pursuit* of negative peace, rather than the result itself.

6 The authors focus on the number of fatalities in a conflict when assessing violence reduction, i.e., "lethal armed conflict violence" (p. 44).

7 According to the authors, these costs are mostly reputational and legal. The combatants who attack civilians face condemnation from the international community and also lose credibility amongst their domestic constituents.

8 This concern was actually addressed in Bara and Hultman's (2020) recent article, in which data on non-UN peacekeeping were included.

9 Rather than merely stating whether a mission was present.

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