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Is Peacekeeping a New Form of Imperialism?

DAVID N. GIBBS

Phyllis Bennis, *Calling the Shots: How Washington Dominates Today's U.N.*, New York: Olive Branch Press, 1996. Pp.272. US\$17.95. ISBN 1-56656-206-6.

The world order that emerged from the end of the Cold War has turned out to be considerably less stable and potentially less benevolent than many had hoped. Rather than inaugurating a new era of peace and stability, recent events in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Rwanda, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan and elsewhere suggest that civil wars and ethnic hatreds could replace East-West tensions as the principal pivot of world politics. The vast quantity of weapons left over from the Cold War, including considerable stores of nuclear weapons, gives the issue of global instability a certain sense of urgency.

In the light of these new concerns, many have seen international organizations, especially the UN, as a new source of optimism. Indeed, the UN has been more deeply involved in more conflicts than at any time in its half century of existence. The new UN role once again raises basic issues of international relations theory and recalls the classic debate between realism and idealism elucidated by E.H. Carr over half a century ago.¹ In recent discussions of peacekeeping, however, it has been idealists who have been dominant; overwhelmingly, those who write about peacekeeping tend also to favour the practice and to hold relatively sanguine views about the possibilities for international cooperation in general. By contrast, contemporary realist writers, with the notable exception of Alan James, have tended to avoid this topic. It is noteworthy, for example, that Kenneth Waltz's survey of international relations after the Cold War makes no mention at all of peacekeeping or the United Nations.²

There has been little active debate between advocates of international cooperation and those who might take a more sceptical view (such as Waltz) and, in the absence of such a debate, basic questions are often elided. The crucial question of interest – in essence, who benefits from purported efforts

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at peacekeeping – has been underemphasized in the recent literature. Phyllis Bennis's book, *Calling the Shots: How Washington Dominates Today's UN*, is a refreshing exception to the general tendency. The book's subtitle gives the reader a straightforward grasp of the book's basic point and, throughout, Bennis argues that post-Cold War efforts at international cooperation under the auspices of the UN and various other institutional mechanisms provide a shallow pretext for the projection of great power influence into remote regions. Overall, there is a strong 'Third Worldist' flavour to this critique, and Bennis decries a range of recent UN actions that have had, in her view, a negative impact on the less developed countries of the southern hemisphere. Such actions include efforts to weaken or eliminate the UN Conference on Trade and Development and other agencies that have traditionally advocated a restructuring of global economic relations; international sanction policies that are typically used to punish selected enemies of the United States (such as Iraq), while they are rarely invoked against US allies (for example, Israel after the invasion of Lebanon, or Indonesia after the invasion of East Timor); the ascendancy of the Security Council and the relative eclipse of the more democratic General Assembly; and the general dominance of the rich, northern countries in the UN, and especially in the Security Council. Although the book focuses attention on the allegedly negative influence that the United States exerts in international organizations, Bennis is also more generally critical of the Western, capitalist powers.

Bennis is intensely disparaging of post-Cold War UN efforts in the area of peacekeeping, and it is this aspect that dominates her critique. The US-led coalition force that overpowered the Iraqi military in Kuwait is viewed as the epitome of recent UN military operations and, in a sense, a template for peacekeeping. The UN is portrayed essentially as a tool of the United States in the events leading up to Operation *Desert Storm*, and (despite some feeble efforts at mediation) the UN served to legitimate what was in essence a US-orchestrated war. Bennis emphasizes that this legitimation resulted, at least in part, from some rather heavy-handed manipulation. She recounts at length how the US delegation openly promised large-scale aid packages to countries that supported US objectives in the Gulf. Concomitantly, opponents were punished: when the Yemeni representative voted against the resolution calling for action against Iraq, he 'was informed by a US diplomat, in full earshot of the world via the UN broadcasting system that it "will be the most expensive no vote you ever cast"'.³

Bennis's view of the Gulf War – that it constituted a major setback for the cause of international peace and security – is of course at odds with most interpretations. A more typical view is that of Max Jakobson, a former Finnish UN delegate who writes that the Gulf War episode was a 'watershed

event' in the history of international cooperation, demonstrating that under favourable circumstances the United Nations 'can be used effectively to resist aggression and restore peace'.⁴ Also Bennis's tendency to equate the 1991 Persian Gulf War with peacekeeping may strike readers as odd, since this war was not in any ordinary sense a peacekeeping operation and, apart from a Security Council authorization, the UN played no direct role in implementing *Desert Storm*.

On further consideration, however, this interpretation makes some sense. Bennis suggests that the Gulf War had important parallels with several subsequent peacekeeping operations, such as the 1992 action in Somalia, where the UN role once again served to legitimate what was in essence a unilateral US intervention. In the Somalia case, as in the Gulf war, the military force was disproportionately from the United States, and the US units operated outside of the UN command structure. Even after the Somalia operation was multilateralized in 1993 – with the withdrawal of most of the US forces and their replacement by a truly international force – the United States remained in a domineering position because of its influence with key UN field personnel. Also the 'rapid reaction force', whose helicopters and air-mobile infantry provided overall security for the operation, remained under the control of the US military. For Bennis, the dominant mode of peacekeeping in the post-Cold War world has been unilateral military action by major powers (typically the US) in which the UN acts as a sanctioning mechanism. She condemns what Boutros Boutros-Ghali has termed the perceived need for the UN to "contract out" more operations to regional organizations or multinational forces led by *major powers with special interests* in the disputes – like the French operation in Rwanda or the US forces in Haiti.⁵ To be sure, Bennis is sceptical regarding the concept of humanitarian intervention in general, but she is especially critical of unilateral operations that are dominated by major powers, where the UN lacks effective operational control. The 'major powers with special interests' noted by Boutros-Ghali cannot be expected to act with impartiality and cannot, therefore, carry out successful peacekeeping missions. Bennis is also critical of the fact that UN legitimation of such operations is usually accomplished through the elitist Security Council, where the major powers hold exceptional clout, rather than through the General Assembly.

In general, Bennis argues that the UN has passively accepted the dictates of the United States, but she falls short of explaining why this is the case. *Calling the Shots* spends too much time condemning the current state of affairs, rather than providing a systematic explanation. At various points, however, Bennis discursively makes reference to UN financial weaknesses and the lack of any permanent UN military and logistical capabilities, and

how these factors might constrain the potential for independent action. With such weaknesses, the United States as the only remaining superpower will move into the dominant role. Bennis argues (generally persuasively) that the United States actively favours such dependence and discourages efforts to establish an independent military capability under the direct control of the UN Secretariat. There have been repeated proposals to revive the Military Staff Committee or to create a permanent UN military force, but such efforts have been effectively blocked by US opposition. Bennis provides some detailed and interesting discussion regarding the project of the Stand-By Elements Team (SEPT) created in 1993. This programme comprises a small, multinational corps of officers, created at the initiative of Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali and headed by a French colonel, which has explored (and continues to explore) the possibility of a UN military force. American opposition has remained a key impediment:

Fifty countries had been visited within the first year of the SEPT's work; 23 had agreed to sign on, and pledges of at least 54,000 troops were in hand...A difference of approach had already emerged between the US and France over how to implement Security Council military involvement [in SEPT]. Paris had offered a contingent of troops that would be made instantly available to the UN for peacekeeping operations, on condition that the Military Staff Committee, long moribund because of Cold War rivalries, be reactivated. That matched Boutros-Ghali's intention....The US however, wanted no part of such a joint military command structure. Its goal would be better met by Council endorsements of unilateral or US-led 'coalition' forces that could intervene or fight without UN interference in Pentagon command structures.⁶

Clearly, Bennis is not the first writer to express frustration at the excessive American tendency towards unilateralism and neo-isolationism, with regard to the UN and international organizations more generally. What is new about her critique, however, is the generally sceptical (often hostile) attitude towards the idea of humanitarian intervention and peacekeeping in general:

In the real world any UN decision to intervene or any U.N. decision to legitimize or endorse any country's unilateral intervention against another country will reflect the dominant power of the intervening side and the relative impotence of the subject nation...anyone who believes that the real motivation for outside governmental military intervention (UN endorsed or otherwise) is the alleviation of civilian hardship is suffering from a serious delusion of benevolence.⁷

Such interventions, in Bennis's view, simply reflect the interests of the

dominant powers, especially of the United States: 'In foreign policy analysis it must be taken for granted that any government's decision-making will be guided by the perceived interests of that government...not by the broader, more evanescent sound bite concerns of internationalism or humanitarianism.' Bennis writes caustically of the 'euphemistic veneer of "humanitarianism"' that often masks the 'more sinister reality of international power that undergirds it'.⁸

Calling the Shots is essentially an advocacy piece, rather than a 'detached' academic analysis. It tends to be journalistic in style. The book fails to make distinctions among different types of peacekeeping. And the argument contains a basic inconsistency: overwhelmingly, Bennis adopts a negative view towards all forms of peacekeeping, yet she occasionally hints that *some* forms of peacekeeping and humanitarian intervention under *certain* circumstances may be justified. Yet Bennis never defines what she would consider legitimate peacekeeping, nor does she explicitly distinguish it from potentially illegitimate peacekeeping. And key questions are left unanswered: even if we accept that peacekeeping in Haiti or Somalia serves the interests of the United States, what exactly *are* these interests? Why would the United States or any other great power wish to project influence into such poor and relatively marginal areas? The issue of great-power motivation is not addressed in any systematic way. The presentation of factual information often appears one-sided, while the tone of the narrative is liable to annoy academic readers.

Such deficiencies will cause many to dismiss the book as a simple polemic, and this is unfortunate. Some of the flaws are less serious than they might appear upon first consideration. It is true, for example, that Bennis fails to analyse potential motivations for the 'imperialistic' activity she describes, but it is easy for the reader to think of such motivations. Somalia lies astride a major oil shipping route that the US military has long regarded as strategically important; the country also contains oil reserves and some moderately large investments by the Continental Oil company.⁹ One need not assume that these interests alone were sufficient to trigger the peacekeeping operation, but it seems doubtful that US policymakers would have disregarded these economic and strategic interests altogether. Similarly, Haiti has been in the US sphere of influence for over a century, and the tradition of US hegemony along with the moderately high level of US investments in the country, might count as plausible motivations in that case. And German interest in the peacekeeping diplomacy relating to ex-Yugoslavia was probably influenced to some extent by the fact that the Balkan region has long fallen within Germany's sphere of influence and was also a major area of German foreign investment.¹⁰ Surely, consideration of legality and humanitarianism are not the only factors motivating

peacekeeping operations, and Bennis is right to draw attention to this fact.

It should also be noted that Bennis's basic line of argument is perfectly consistent with much of what is known about international relations. That great powers might use their force to dominate UN activities would come as no surprise to researchers familiar with the realist tradition of study. Realists will not generally share Bennis's tendency to condemn such behaviour, nor will they support her criticisms of US foreign policy; but the main assumption of her central argument – that efforts at international cooperation cannot transcend great-power interests – would be perfectly comprehensible to such analysts as Hans Morgenthau or Henry Kissinger.¹¹ Bennis's ideas seem intuitively plausible, and they merit further investigation.

In a review essay published in 1995, Sandra Whitworth noted a major gap in the peacekeeping literature: 'By asking only technical questions a whole series of political questions remain unasked. None of these works [reviewed by Whitworth]...explores whether particular interests are served within particular national militaries through the promotion of peacekeeping.'¹² *Calling the Shots* is one of the first studies that addresses this gap and analyses how considerations of national power can affect peacekeeping.¹³ It may be unfashionable to view peacekeeping as simply another aspect of *realpolitik*, but this possibility must be opened for discussion. Bennis deserves considerable credit for helping to initiate such discussion, and in the process she has produced a provocative book that deserves wide attention among students of international peacekeeping.

NOTES

1. E.H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis*, New York: Harper and Row, 1964. The book was originally published in its first edition in 1939.
2. See Kenneth Waltz, 'The Emerging Structure of International Relations', *International Security*, Vol.18, No.2, 1993.
3. Bennis, p.33.
4. Max Jakobson, *The United Nations in the 1990s: A Second Chance?*, New York: Twentieth Century Fund, p.82.
5. Boutros-Ghali cited by Bennis, p.112 (her emphasis).
6. Bennis, pp.92–3.
7. *Ibid.*, p.84.
8. *Ibid.*
9. On the oil issue, see: *World Oil*, Aug. 1993; 'Somalia is "Sitting on an Oil Fortune"', *African Business*, Apr. 1993; 'Somalia's Energy Secrets Could Yield Another Yemen', *Oil and Gas Investor*, June 1993; 'Oil Hopes Hinge on North Somalia Oil Exploration', *Petroleum Economist*, Oct. 1991; 'The Oil Factor in Somalia: Four American Petroleum Giants Had Agreements with the African Nation Before its Civil War Began – They Could Reap Big Rewards if Peace is Restored', *Los Angeles Times*, 18 Jan. 1993.
10. Germany's strategic and economic interest in this region was explored in the classic study:

Albert Hirschman, *National Power and the Structure of Foreign Trade*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980.

11. Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, New York: Knopf, 1967, chs 16–18. Morgenthau acknowledged that considerations of international law, public opinion and morality could play some role in influencing international conduct, but these would remain secondary to considerations of national power and interest. Kissinger's fascination with the realist foreign policy of Prince Metternich was a continuing theme in his academic career. See Henry Kissinger, 'Reflections on American Diplomacy', *Foreign Affairs*, Oct. 1956.
12. Sandra Whitworth, 'Where is the Politics in Peacekeeping?', *International Journal*, Vol.50, No.2, 1995, p.434.
13. Among the few studies that raise this issue is: Laura Neack, 'U.N. Peacekeeping: In the Interest of Community or Self?', *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol.32, No.2, 1995.