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Developing Countries and UN Peacebuilding: Opportunities and Challenges

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In recent years, developing countries have been contributing to central debates on the United Nations' (UN) peacebuilding approach to conflict-affected countries, advancing a discourse and practice that broadens the concept and the understanding of building a sustainable peace (Coning & Call, 2017a). Also defined under the umbrella of "emerging powers", "rising powers", "middle powers", and "Global South countries", several states outside Europe and the United States (U.S.) started to articulate, in their own terms, a framework that tries to deal with the underlying causes of conflicts in war torn societies. The Peacebuilding Commission, created in 2005, and the International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding, established in 2008, are examples of institutional spaces used by developing countries to debate new paths to the mainstream "liberal peace" (Coning & Call, 2017a: 3). In the wake of their recent economic growth and contested political stabilization, countries like Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Russia, South Africa, Turkey, among others from the "South", became much more involved in the security, development, and humanitarian business. Despite their involvement and growing relevance in those fields, it is still uncertain to which extent these states could really reshape the current policies and architecture of UN peacebuilding.

This article argues that regardless of the prevailing UN peacebuilding principles and the persistence of a *realpolitik* rationality among its state members, developing countries are reforming and adapting the current model, creating a more feasible landscape for building a sustainable peace. This engagement is developed under the current rules created by the great powers in the international society, which poses great opportunities and challenges for non-Western countries.

The Emergence of the Western Peacebuilding Grammar and its Contestations

Security cooperation among states is not a recent phenomenon. Since the first centuries, dating back to antiquity, political communities sought to promote mini-lateral agreements and/or systemic peace and stability (Bellamy and Williams, 2011: 71). Inevitably, the great powers have always exercised a prominent role in those activities, especially during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a period where the first steps towards a collective effort to maintain peace and security were gradually formalized and institutionalized (Bellamy and Williams, 2011: 71). During the Concert of Europe and the League of Nations, "peacekeeping" activities were part of the responsibilities and assignments of the Western-European states, marking a clear hierarchy in the international society (Bellamy and Williams, 2011: 71). In both periods, attempts to build peace were related to the European great powers' strategic interests: deployment of humanitarian operations to protect key geopolitical areas, authorization of international forces to maintain their colonial position, and other military activities to suppress any attempt of risking their domestic and international *status quo* (MacQueen, 2006: 23-28).

Following this pattern, after the end of the Second World War, both the U.S. and the Soviet Union emerged as the world's superpowers, replacing the traditional European states in the international structure, but at the same time maintaining the "rules and practices of the previous period (...) with minor changes" (Watson, 1992: 288). Rooted on a realist rationality, these two superpowers provided security assistance throughout the world in order to preserve their state of affairs (Sedra, 2017: 56). These experiences were based on a narrow definition and a hard orientation of security. In other words: from 1945 to 1989 cooperation was limited to "coercive security structures", such as

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“military, police, intelligence agencies, etc.” (Sedra, 2017: 56). In addition, during the Cold War, these assistances had a “singular focus on security force operational effectiveness” of insurgent groups and regime partners (Ibid.).

Mainly driven by the so-called “developed countries”, located at the heart of the European international society, train-and-equip security activities were in a great degree implemented by Western donors, not concerned at that time with “democratic accountability and civilian control” (Sedra, 2017: 56). Thomas G. Weiss and Giovanna Kuele note that even with the creation of the UN in 1945, the Global North states exercised a prominent role in international peace and security activities during the following decades (Weiss and Kuele, 2019). It is worth noting that the mandates and purposes of the first UN observer missions and interposed forces obeyed the great powers’ bipolar tenets. These peacekeeping operations were limited to a deterrence logic, negotiation of a relative non-complex cease-fire agreement, and supervision of troops withdrawals (Dorn, 2011: 16). In this sense, little political arena was conceived to advance a peacebuilding transformative agenda. However, outside the UN, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) were the first ones to implement what was latter labeled as Security Sector Reform (SSR) in some Eastern European countries. These reforms were conceived as a strategic tool to “integrate the bloated Soviet-style security sectors of the candidate states into the military alliance” (Sedra, 2017: 56). Other regional organizations, like the Commonwealth, the League of Arab States (LAS), Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the Organization of American States (OAS) also exercised an important role in peace and security activities, but they “remained largely outside the UN framework and thus developed in a piecemeal fashion” (Bellamy and Williams, 2011: 91).

After the end of the Cold War, the European international society, previously organized by the U.S. and the Soviet Union, witnessed the globalization of its membership. The Western-inspired state forms, and Western-inspired rules, customs, and habits expanded to incorporate the “periphery” into a single international order (Roberson, 2009: 189). Various European governments and multilateral instances, including the UN, NATO, OSCE, among several international institutions, expanded their approach to security cooperation, establishing linkages with the development and humanitarian agendas. In the case of the UN, starting in 1991, the organization introduced some institutional mechanisms to achieve such goals, including the creation of the role of the Emergency Relief Coordinator, the Consolidated Appeals Process, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee, and the Central Emergency Response Fund. Furthermore, several reports, documents, high-level panels, and projects built a specific design for security assistance in different phases of a certain conflict, beginning with preventive diplomacy moving to the last stage characterized as peacebuilding. This last spectrum of peace and security activities, according to the UN, “encompass state institution-building, economic recovery, national ownership, and, most recently, sustaining peace” (Call and Coning, 2017b: 247).

Subsequently to the end of the Cold War, the UN argued that the most effective way to promote peace and security in the international system was to reproduce the Weberian/Westphalian centralized state authority in “failed”, “fragile”, and “collapsed” states. Peacebuilding should be founded on a liberal-democratic design, according to the Western ideals historically rooted in the European tradition. Development and democracy were seen as *sine qua non* conditions to overcome the threats posed by “complex emergencies”, highly concentrated in the underdeveloped countries of the South. To promote such approach a whole multidimensional framework for military, police, and civilian aid was put forward by several actors involved in the field of peacebuilding, a domain still controlled by the developed states of the North. This peacebuilding grammar, also called “liberal peace” or the “security-development nexus”, postulates that a state could only enjoy a full membership of this global international society through a liberal-democratic statehood.

During the 1990s and early 2000s the “liberal peace” was practiced by several bilateral development agencies, governmental, non-governmental, and private institutions. However, the Europeans and Americans were not the only agents in the expansion of international society, the recipients had their own agendas to security, development, and humanitarian issues. Despite the liberal peace mainstream, developed by the UN, several non-Western countries challenged the liberal-democratic principles. These critiques came in the wake of the poor record of the peacebuilding model in countries like Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Sierra Leone, and elsewhere it was implemented.

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The main flaws, limitations, and inconsistencies identified by these developing countries and other policy-makers outside the West's inner circle are: first, the model tends to be overly technocratic, disempowering local voices and interests; second, the "security-development nexus" tends to treat non-Western states as a blank sheet, disregarding their indigenous institutions and complex authority structures, imposing a top-down, donor-driven approach; third, "the liberal project is largely advanced with external strategic objectives rather than local needs in mind"; fourth, this Western approach to peacebuilding avoids local power dynamics and institutions; and fifth, there is a huge political, economic and social cost associated with the liberal peace charged by the great powers located in the Global North (Sedra, 2017: 29-42).

Taking into consideration all these elements, developing countries started to dispute this broad definition of peacebuilding and launched their own understanding of building peace. Demanding, but, at the same time, exercising a strategic role in the international society, these countries "emphasized the comparative advantages they bring to peacebuilding over traditional Western actors" (Call and Coning, 2017b: 244). But what is at stake when it comes to this non-Western peacebuilding policies and operations?

What is Really Different About Developing Countries Understanding and Practice of Peacebuilding?

In a recently edited and published book, "*Rising Powers & Peacebuilding: Breaking the Mold?*", Charles T. Call and Cedric de Coning argue that there are core characteristics of the developing countries approach to peacebuilding: first, both authors state that each country from the South builds its own concept of peacebuilding based on their own identity and recent historical experiences; second, contrary to the traditional immediate schedule advanced by the UN, developing countries have a longer time horizon for peacebuilding, reflecting "some degree of strategic patience and historic perspective"; third, according to the principles of sovereignty and self-determination, developing countries emphasize national ownership in their peacebuilding approach; fourth, these countries from the South reject Western conditions of cooperation, reflecting, in this sense, a less securitized and more egalitarian vision of global order; fifth, non-Western peacebuilding tends to be based on mutual respect, equality, and cultural understanding; sixth, the non-developed countries emphasize more technical cooperation than aid; and, seventh, developing countries are less constrained by monitoring, evaluation and impact measures, and deadlines (Call and Coning, 2017b: 256-262).

In this process of contestation and moderated review of existing projects, developing countries do not want to establish a holistic approach to peacebuilding. Instead, concerned with contributing to some aspects of conflict resolution and stabilization, these countries understand that peacebuilding encompasses several activities before, during and after an armed conflict. These countries do not invest their human and institutional capitals to reform an entire country. Neither they endorse some aspects of the existing liberal-peace paradigm. What is peculiar about developing countries is that they do not see peacebuilding "as an element of externally driven, transformative state building and democratization" (Sedra, 2017: 87). Regardless of their differences, countries like Brazil, India, China, South Africa, and Russia invested in conflict prevention through political agreements and arbitration and other related activities outside the UN, even if they all increased their engagement in UN peacekeeping operations. Considering themselves as more suitable to deal with regional crises, these countries, invested in mediation and negotiation in their regional and extraregional circumference. In addition, these countries understand that peacebuilding could be extended to "health projects, students exchanges, education support such as building schools, food security, infrastructure development of any sort, as well as political/security cooperation like security advisers, mediation support, dialogue facilitation, and elections support" (Call and Coning, 2017b: 248).

Recent UN peacebuilding normative and institutional developments have been favoring the engagement of developing countries in several important ways (Weiss and Kuele, 2019). First, due to their recent relevant participation in peace and security activities, inside and outside the UN, the organization understands that a "Global South" perspective is more than necessary to fulfill local needs and attend an even more complex scenarios on the field. Second, several UN bodies are much more willing to discuss and find a common denominator to promote peace, security, and stability in the international system among its member states. Third, the UN has been exploring a sustainable engagement with regional organizations, which could be used as an important tool for conflict prevention and resolution. Fourth, by integrating developing countries officials to its high-level meetings, panels,

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workshops, and other related conferences, the UN is broadening its discourse and practice of peacebuilding (Weiss and Kuele, 2019).

Although it is not possible to locate a single peacebuilding understanding and concept advanced by developing countries, several states from the Global South have been using its own institutions, political opportunities, institutional space within the UN, and other multilateral forums to propose an agenda of reform. The more their involvement grows in peacekeeping and other related activities, the more they try to contribute not only with troops, but also with doctrine, training, and strategic components for UN peacekeeping operations. These countries have been encouraging South-South cooperation among its peers through their national peacekeeping centers. In addition, they have been undertaking several projects in the South to enhance their expertise, status, and recognition in the international system. Although it is not clear the weight and extent of their contribution, emerging powers represent an important source by whom the actual liberal peace is going to be reformed and tailored to specific realities on the ground.

Conclusion: How to Reform the Western Peacebuilding Grammar?

The UN's future as a whole is subject to the rebalancing of the North-South relations in the coming years (Peter, 2019: 9). The organization's "decision-making, financing, and ability to design operations" is certainly under review because of the contribution by developing countries to UN peace and security activities (Ibid.). The current international society of states, established by European countries, is under considerable change, with the deterioration of the Western powers and the emergence of the Global South as an important player in the age of multipolarization (Abdenur, 2019: 50-60). The most pressing challenges to the contesters are how to reform an international society with historically rooted principles, norms, expectations, and understandings about how to achieve a sustainable peace in the international society.

Developing countries present several political, economic, and social limitations. Their performance on those fields is an important indicator on how they are going to continue influencing the UN and other intergovernmental institutions. According to some critics, these engagements could be defined as a subaltern pride or the mere perpetuation of the colonial and imperial practices of the European great powers. Since they all seek to increase their regional and international prestige, these practices are still informed by the realpolitik logic of the eighteenth century. However, even if they intend, in the long term, to achieve a hegemonic status in the international system, their current contribution indicates a real possibility to reform and adapt the current UN peacebuilding approach.

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