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Interview – Kai Michael Kenkel

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Kai Michael Kenkel is an associate professor in the Institute of International Relations at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro (IRI/PUC-Rio) and an associated researcher at the German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA) in Hamburg. He holds degrees from The Johns Hopkins University and what is now the Graduate Institute in Geneva. His area of specialization is international security—particularly peace operations and norms of intervention—and civil-military relations. He is the coordinator of the recently founded Center on Armed Forces and Democracy (NEDEFA) at PUC-Rio. He has published extensively on these subjects, including in International Peacekeeping, Global Governance, International Affairs, and Global Responsibility to Protect.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

If we're talking about IR in general, I think this really depends a great deal on where you're situated, but for me personally it's about the impact academic work has on policy, or more accurately, the human condition. As I come from the area of conflict and intervention studies, in general I'd say the most interesting and applicable work has to do with how we end or prevent conflicts and prevent or reduce human suffering. In the Global South, where I am based, there are a lot of interesting debates related to our specific situation in the world and how to overcome inequalities in the global hierarchy and the divergent life conditions they create. In this sense I think the work done along the lines of what Roger Mac Ginty is doing is interesting and applicable. In theoretical terms, critical constructivist literature such as norm contestation has huge relevance for people in the Global South, as it gets at the constitutive rules that prop up global inequalities. It's also gratifying to find that gender and race studies have reached a point where work on these factors condition the entire academic undertaking and are being given more space in the mainstream. Also, given current events in places like Brazil, the US and the UK, studies on populism and the pushback against democracy and multiculturalism are of paramount importance.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

The way I understand the world has changed a great deal since I moved to Brazil 15 years ago. It's rather symptomatic that I made it through 12 years of training at "elite" universities in the US and Europe without really ever having been confronted with viewpoints from outside the North Atlantic bubble. The inequalities that structure the international system, the double standards, the obliviousness of the vast majority in the Global North of how their privileged quality of life depends upon hierarchies that keep others down, were things I was only confronted with living in Brazil. Luckily, I am based at an Institute where dealing academically with these issues is a priority, so it was a rapid eye-opening that led to a lot of soul-searching. In the end, it was my colleagues in my own institution, in years of patient conversations, that changed my view of the world, rather than one book or article that brought about an epiphany. Being confronted with certain realities if you're suddenly on the outside can be a radicalizing moment—if you have a social conscience. The idea inherent to non-positivist approaches like constructivism that things can be changed is a great motivator and gives a certain hope for change that say, Realist billiard-ball metaphors do not.

In your recent paper in Contemporary Security Policy, you discuss the impact of UN peace operations on civil-military relations in the sending countries. How does contributing to peacekeeping operations impact domestic political structures?

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Arturo Sotomayor did a crucial study on this some years back called *The Myth of the Democratic Peacekeeper*, where the focus is on civil-military relations. The basic idea he tests is the notion that participating in peacekeeping operations (PKOs) provides a demonstration effect for militaries from not-yet-fully democratic countries, where interaction with Northern states will teach democratic paradigms of subordination to civilian control. It also keeps troops and officers occupied with a prestigious foreign mission that distracts from potential coup planning at home. This is true when states are doing liberal peacebuilding—basically civilian, humanitarian tasks executed by soldiers, which supposedly civilianizes them. However—and this is the argument behind the article—stabilization missions, which prioritize military goals and do not focus on the local civilian population, can teach the opposite lesson, acting as incubators for incomplete civilian control. The diversionary peace is in one sense another iteration of this notion that (positive) ideas only flow from the North to the South and postcolonial countries still need to learn from the North, and this is what led me to question the idea. Other influences PKO participation can have on troop contributing countries are combat experience, budget increases, redeeming one's image with the population, and other aspects that strengthen the military's hand domestically.

How have UN peacekeeping missions changed since their inception? Has the scope, mission, or makeup of the operations changed at all?

PKOs are extremely field-driven and their evolution is difficult to systematize. I've tried to do so in an article in 2013 in the *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* (in English) using the notion of generations, but UN practice doesn't fit into academic categories very neatly. There is a huge literature on the evolution of over seventy years of PKOs, with perhaps the most useful contributions coming from the pens of Paul Williams and Alex Bellamy on the one hand, and Paul Diehl on the other. Put very briefly, there are several axes of evolution. The three basic principles of peace operations—consent, impartiality and the non – (or minimum) use of force—are a good touchstone for this. All three have evolved. The humanitarian imperative to save lives (or protect civilians, as it were) has supplanted traditional notions of sovereign consent; impartiality does not exist in the face of genocide, as Sergio Vieira de Mello put it; and as mandates have changed, particularly as regards the imperative to protect civilians—so has the understanding of “minimum” force. Peace operations have become more proactive, more ambitious and more forceful. They originally were wedded to a conservative notion of conflict resolution and designed to facilitate a return by willing parties to the negotiation table. Today, they will intervene, with very robust military force, in the very social fabric of host nations, and reflect the international community's recurring priorities such as gender equality and other aspects of the liberal underpinnings of the world order. With the advent of stabilization, we are seeing the rediscovery of PKOs by large powers, where they used to be the preserve of middle powers, and a return to more openly strategic motivations.

What role does the UN bureaucracy have in determining the scope and mission of peacekeeping operations? How do member states exert influence in this discussion?

There is a huge institutional *acquis* concerning PKOs and intervention in the UN and within the P-5 and frequently elected UNSC members (as well as specialized agencies and other parts of the UN apparatus). Military, development, political and logistical expertise within DPKO and DFS has reached very high levels of specialization and generated a set of semi-standardized responses particularly as regards mission structure and mandate components (gender, rule of law, elections, PoC). Mission size and the level of ambition will depend on political will on the Council, but the form this takes is shaped by considerable institutional memory and standard procedures. Member state influence is obviously strongly in the hands of the P-5 (with proactive penholdership often concentrated in the P-3), with large contributors (financial and troops) also taking a place at the table on specific missions. Experienced TCCs have some say, as the UN has over the years learned to listen to those with their own institutional memory. Mission planning always has to triangulate political will/equilibrium in the UNSC, troop and financial availability, and what will actually work in a given situation in the field. This has mostly happened behind the scenes by the time a mission is up for formal discussion.

How have emerging powers such as India, Brazil, and South Africa contributed to the norms and practice surrounding peacekeeping and peace enforcement?

When it was still an active participant in UN PKOs, before the current anti-multilateral regime, Brazil had a norms-

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based approach that was quite different from, say, India. There was a concerted effort to come up with ways of doing things in PKOs that reflected its and the Global South's (or postcolonial states') traditions. So more of a development focus, less use of force, less of a situation where P-5 or P-3 interests are sold as identical to those of the "international community". Supporting the view that ideas can in fact flow from South to North as well. But there was, by the nature of the thing, little funding, consistency or long-term intentionality behind this beyond a few key personalities, and it petered out during Dilma Rousseff's second term. Outside of PKOs, in the larger intervention debate, the biggest contribution was of course the "responsibility while protecting", championed by Foreign Minister Antonio Patriota and a group of "Young Turks" in the Foreign Ministry. This initiative showed Brazil's willingness to take on a role as a norm entrepreneur, and also its mistrust of Western motives in the wake of the fractious Libyan intervention. I think they expected it to be criticized by the West, but not other states in the Global South such as India. India acted more out of a concert effect among aspirants to permanent UNSC membership. Responsibility while Protecting (RwP) was meant to set binding standards for UNSC implementation of intervention mandates. It didn't ultimately succeed in doing this, but it did leave a lasting legacy in shaping the debate over interventions and particularly the normative role of Southern states in the debate. In that sense it was very important. India hasn't challenged UN practice normatively as much, and it does not have nearly the same qualms over the use of force as Brazil did during those times. To be fair, neither did the Brazilian Armed Forces, who also used quite a robust level of force in Haiti, which was later used to justify domestic intervention by the Army in public security matters. South Africa has been a major player on the African continent and has made strong contributions there with the continental framework but has not recently sought a significant role globally in this respect.

How has Brazil's role in the global order changed over time and what do you anticipate in the future?

The question is whether there was an element of lasting innovation in what was achieved during the Workers' Party years in Brazil. The country's global role has depended for a long time on commodity price cycles—when there's money in the coffers, the country plays a much larger role, especially when this is combined with leaders who have a clear plan for the country's role and ideological positioning, such as Lula da Silva did. When the economy is in crisis and leaders are uninterested or incapable of taking on a protagonist foreign policy role, as is the case now with the radical-right Bolsonaro government, the country's role shrinks back even further than when it was as a classic Latin American power in the past. So the question is, was there a lasting legacy to the Lula years that will not be undone by the illiberal Bolsonaro interlude? I think Brazil did show that it has very capable diplomats, armed forces that are competent within the restricted framework of PKOs, and a certain reserve of exportable experiences that can make it an international player. But the reality is that the country, as many grounded in the constraints of the Global South, suffers from the cyclical economics of commodity dependence, and from a political class that does not engage in long-term planning or look much beyond its own personal enrichment. In this sense, even when the fight for a seat at the table shows some results, domestic conditions mean the country can end up shooting itself in the foot as it did with Rousseff's impeachment in 2016 and the election of an unmitigated extremist to the Presidency in 2018.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of international relations?

I'm sure this is bound to sound cheesy, but: be aware of the change you have the ability to make in the world, and do not waste that potential because your own stomach is full. Academic life, especially teaching but also writing, has a normative component: our job is to know how the world works, and that means not only pointing out inequalities and moral dissonances, but actively doing something about them even when they benefit ourselves the most. The academy can be a very solitary place, especially at the beginning, so don't forget you are part of a larger community, and that a little solidarity, whether it crosses the Equator or just the corridor in the department, can go a long way.