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Arjun Banerjee
University of Tennessee Knoxville

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Book Review

The United Nations, Peace and Security: From Collective Security to the Responsibility to Protect

Ramesh Thakur

Cambridge University Press, USA; Second Edition, 2017, 428 pages
\$29.99, ISBN 13: 978-1-316-62772-3

Reviewed by Arjun Banerjee

Prolific writer, former Senior Vice-Rector of the United Nations University in Tokyo (and Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations), and current Director of the Centre for Nuclear Non-Proliferation and Disarmament (CNND) in the Australian National University, Ramesh Thakur has had a distinguished career particularly suited to writing about the intricate workings of the United Nations. From his unique academic position within the UN system, he has veritably had a ringside seat, as it were, to observe the numerous changes that have come about in the UN's role and responsibilities from the 1990s through the first decade of the 2000s. Cambridge University Press has just republished Thakur's book, *The United Nations, Peace and Security: From Collective Security to the Responsibility to Protect* in its second edition, having been originally published in 2006.

The book traces the metamorphosis of UN policies from that of collective security in 1945, when it was founded, to the more contemporary notion of the responsibility to protect (R2P), and with regard to the latter, the edition significantly updates its predecessor by cataloguing these transformations within the UN system up to 2016.

The writing itself is lucid and easy-to-grasp, and manages to tread a fine line, argumentatively, between provocative and enjoyable. The work is segmented into four major parts across 13 chapters, each chapter subdivided meaningfully into digestible pellets of organized information. While Part 1 focuses on the UN's historic peacekeeping and collective security roles, it segues smoothly into the ideas of "soft" and "hard" security issues in later parts—on one hand, soft references to human rights, international sanctions, etc, and on the other, hard discussion of nuclear threats, the threat of international terrorism, and UN-authorized interventions in Afghanistan, Syria, and Libya in recent years. Thakur candidly casts light on unilateral US/NATO interventions in Kosovo or Iraq, without UN sanction, and paraphrases Mark Antony from *Julius Caesar* for the Iraq incident: "the good that the coalition may have done lies interred with the bones of the dead in Iraq..." adding that the harm they caused lives on in infamy. Thakur, in fact, wishes to metamorphose the UN into a more effective instrument for tackling both these "soft" and "hard" security issues.

The scholarship presented is vast, touching on numerous occurrences in international affairs. However, the main thrust of the book lies in the notion of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P)—the notion that sovereignty entails a responsibility to protect all populations from mass atrocity crimes and human rights violations. R2P was endorsed by the UN General Assembly in 2005 as a check against state sovereignty that also came with a license to kill domestic populace or subsections thereof, should the latter become oppositional to the authorities. Thakur writes that the international community has experienced too many tragedies like those in Rwanda or Cambodia. Though R2P is a debatable issue, Thakur nonetheless remains confident that the time for it has arrived as well as that it

can be implemented efficiently and successfully. Thakur does not fully prove the argument, so the notion reads somewhat as wishful thinking.

Thakur's book is a critique of UN policies and a revelation of the good, bad, and ugly within the system. However, it conjures up an ultimately optimistic image and has a message for those who may be unbelievers of the relevance of the UN in the modern day. The message is that a balanced path needs to be trod between the realists and the idealists, the cynics and the romantics. Thakur reiterates the words of the former UN Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjöld in his reminder that the United Nations was "not created in order to bring us to heaven, but in order to save us from hell."

As the most prescient crystal ball is often in the rear-view mirror, examining the UN's past mistakes in Thakur's book would be a good step in the right direction for policymakers or academics working in international security. Even for general readers of modern history and international affairs, the book is replete with anecdotes and remains accessible and reader-friendly.

Thakur's textual evidences are fitting, and every chapter contains footnotes with numerous primary and secondary sources. His argument that the UN has adapted to a dynamic world over seventy years by transitioning from merely collective security (a security arrangement in which each state accepts a "one for all and all for one" policy) earlier to the R2P today is logical and the research is exhaustive. Thakur is one of the foremost authorities on the UN today. Along with perhaps Paul Kennedy's *The Parliament of Man* (2006) and Stanley Meisler's *United Nations: A History* (2011), Thakur's book deserves a space on the shelf, particularly if the United Nations is of interest to the reader.