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# Still the Spectre at the Feast: Comparisons between Peacekeeping and Imperialism in Peacekeeping Studies Today

PHILIP CUNLIFFE

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The sheer ambition and scale of UN peacebuilding today inevitably invokes comparison with historic practices of colonialism and imperialism, from critics and supporters of peacebuilding alike. The legitimacy of post-settlement peacebuilding is often seen to hinge on the question of the extent to which it transcends historic practices of imperialism. This article offers a critique of how these comparisons are made in the extant scholarship, and argues that supporters of peacekeeping deploy an under-theorized and historically one-sided view of imperialism. The article argues that the attempt to flatter peacebuilding by comparison with imperialism fails, and that the theory and history of imperialism still provide a rich resource for both the critique and conceptualization of peacekeeping practice. The article concludes by suggesting how new forms of imperial power can be projected through peacebuilding.

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This article reassesses the discussion of imperialism in the literature on UN peacebuilding. In particular, it sets out to re-examine the various ways in which modern peacebuilding operations are differentiated from forms of neo-imperial rule.<sup>1</sup> The discussion proceeds by identifying the types of distinctions that are made between peacebuilding operations and imperialism within the scholarly literature. I examine the conceptual and logical integrity, and historical validity, of claims to the effect that modern peacebuilding operations possess certain distinctive attributes that raise peacebuilding above imperialism. These claims are unconvincing because they rely on under-theorised and historically impoverished understandings of empire. A more profound understanding of peacebuilding and peacekeeping can be gained by drawing more deeply on a rich tradition of imperialist theorizing in the discipline of international relations.

The geographic extent of UN peacekeeping operations throughout the world, the transformative intent of peacebuilding and the political reach that peacebuilders extend in the course of their operations makes imperialism an obvious benchmark with which to gauge the role and place of peacebuilding in international affairs today. But while the question of whether or not peacekeeping/peacebuilding mirrors imperialism is often raised, it is also with ritualistic predictability equally often summarily dismissed. The question is important because it raises broad concerns about the purpose and rationale of peacekeeping in world order. Nor is the question merely abstract. The extent to which peacebuilding can be differentiated from imperialism is directly used to legitimize

peacebuilding operations. Although there are a greater variety of voices in peacebuilding debates than ever before extending to post-colonial, Foucauldian and critical theory perspectives, imperialism remains under-theorized and under-utilized in the study of peacekeeping. While much invoked as a concept, it is seldom systematically deployed in peacekeeping debates. Thus the spectre of imperialism that scholars of peacebuilding conjure with is more powerful than they realize, and as shown below, attempts to exorcize it to date have failed.

The focus of this article is on what Roland Paris termed 'post-settlement peacebuilding' (his definition is discussed below). At least since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, empire has returned to the core of debates in international relations. While imperial power is more easily identified in those peacebuilding operations that are directly tied to the political interests and military initiatives of a powerful state – such as with US operations in Iraq and Afghanistan – 'post-settlement peacebuilding' as opposed to 'post-conquest peacebuilding' is widely believed to possess attributes that distinguish it from outright imperialism or the more dubious and militarily robust 'post-conquest' operations.

While Paris concedes that 'all peacebuilding missions involve a measure of foreign intrusion in domestic affairs', he maintains that 'destroying a regime through external invasion is hardly equivalent, in degree or kind, to deploying a mission at the request of local parties with the goal of [implementing] a peace settlement'.<sup>2</sup> At the very least it can be said that questions of imperial power are more ambiguous when it comes to these cases of post-settlement peacebuilding. Simply put, post-settlement peacebuilding is the 'hard case' for questions of imperialism. Thus although not sharing Paris' confidence that post-settlement and post-conquest peacebuilding operations can be so easily distinguished, in this article I am not seeking to draw out these similarities, but rather to scrutinise the case made for those supposedly redeeming features of post-settlement peacebuilding. I begin by providing some context for the discussion by briefly surveying how imperialism has been repeatedly invoked – often with surprising bluntness – in discussion of peacekeeping, and how this reflects changed attitudes to imperialism and its legacy. I identify the stakes involved in analysing peacebuilding by considering how such operations are legitimized in international politics. I then analyse in more detail the ways in which peacebuilding is believed to resemble imperialism, and the crucial factors seen to differentiate peacebuilding from imperialism.

The claims made for the redeemed character of post-settlement peacebuilding are clustered into arguments of two broad types: aims and modalities. In the first case, the aims of peacebuilding are held to be a-strategic and therefore non-imperial, while in the second case the modalities of peacebuilding – that it is multilateral and consensual – make it incompatible with empire-building projects. I will show that the contemporary practices of peacebuilding are not only visible in the historical record of European imperialism, but are also consistent with neo-imperial theories of international order. The method therefore is that of immanent critique. Rather than semantic jugglery or attempts to force discussion of peacebuilding into pre-given definitions of empire, I expose the conceptual and

historical shortcomings of those attempts to rescue peacebuilding from charges of imperialism.

### Peacekeeping Scholarship and the Study of Imperialism

One might expect that comparisons between modern day peacebuilding operations and imperial rule, colonialism and empire, would be controversial and bitterly contested. Empire after all, is widely seen to be a redundant and intrinsically illegitimate form of political rule, while peacekeeping and peacebuilding is an accepted and established international practice that has become ever more widespread since the end of the cold war. Such an assumption would be wrong: discussion of empire in peacekeeping studies is open and frank, even among the staunchest supporters of peacebuilding.

Discussion of 'liberal imperialism' is rife, albeit most commonly in reference to those operations and cases of intervention that, for whatever reason, have been more prominent in the policy-making of Western capitals, as indicated by the sub-title to Michael Ignatieff's *Empire Lite: Nation-building in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan*.<sup>3</sup> Even the viceroys of the new 'liberal imperialism' are unashamed of their role. 'What we have [in Bosnia] is near-imperialism', Lord Paddy Ashdown, former High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, told a British journalist, adding that his job incorporated 'a Gilbert and Sullivan title and powers that should make a liberal blush' (though as the reporter noted, Ashdown wasn't blushing).<sup>4</sup> According to Kimberly Marten, '[e]mpire and peacekeeping have become intertwined as never before'.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, it is possible to identify a broad consensus within the literature that peacebuilding is near-enough imperialism... *nearly*, but not quite. What are the crucial ingredients of peacebuilding that distinguish it from imperialism?

First let us consider in what way peacebuilding can be compared to imperialism. Roland Paris sketches out several issues: transformative peacebuilding represents the dissemination of a distinctive, Western-inspired model of liberal political and economic relations from the core to the periphery. This model is variously diffused or implanted through peace settlements crafted with international support and containing internationally-sponsored provisions, alongside the supply of expert advice and imposition of conditionalities and 'proxy governance' (where local functions and institutions of government are administered by outside actors).<sup>6</sup> According to Paris, this amounts to a new 'standard of civilisation' which states 'must accept in order to gain full rights and the recognition of the international community'.<sup>7</sup> The old *mission civilisatrice* empowered the European colonial states to impose their will on other territories; today similar sentiments of benevolent reform drive peacebuilding, according to Paris.

Along similar lines, Marten says that 'squeamishness' about the imperial label should not blind us to the utility of the analytic comparison.<sup>8</sup> She compares what she calls 'complex peacekeeping' and colonialism – mostly based on the similarity of conflicts that early colonisers and today's peacekeepers face: '[t]he tasks performed by imperial soldiers in many ways match what is being asked of today's peacekeepers, and we should therefore not pretend that peacekeeping tasks are

unprecedented or out of the realm of military competence'.<sup>9</sup> Michael Doyle and Nicholas Sambanis suggest that 'multidimensional peace operations entail' a 'quasi-colonial presence'.<sup>10</sup>

Simon Chesterman notes that the sheer scale of socio-political transformation embodied in peacebuilding operations leaves colonialism and the military occupations resulting out of the world wars as the only possible scale of comparison for the most ambitious of UN peacebuilding operations. 'Is it possible', he asks, 'to establish the conditions for legitimate and sustainable national governance through a period of benevolent foreign autocracy?'<sup>11</sup> Ignatieff has perhaps been most explicit of all with his idea of 'empire lite': an empire because US interventions abroad represent 'an attempt to permanently order the world of states and markets according to its national interests',<sup>12</sup> undertaken 'for imperial reasons: to consolidate its global hegemony, to assert and maintain its leadership and to ensure stability in those zones essential to the security of itself or its allies'.<sup>13</sup>

These views are representative rather than exhaustive. There are several striking aspects of this literature worth emphasising. First, peacebuilding is seen to be similar to imperialism in several respects, notably that it involves outsiders promoting a distinctive set of values, consonant with the reigning values of international order, transforming societies up to and including the use of force if necessary. Second, the aforementioned authors are all supportive of peacebuilding and international intervention, albeit to varying degrees and with varying recommendations. They do not represent radical opinion on the subject. It is this that, third, makes the frank comparison with imperialism and colonialism all the more striking. For the comparison between peacebuilding and imperialism is not a bitter concession made by these authors in the course of a struggle with their critics where they are forced to admit that peacebuilding is much like the derided (and illegal under the terms of international law) practice of colonialism. Indeed, there is at least as much 'mainstream' literature that makes the comparison between imperialism and peacekeeping as there is critical literature.<sup>14</sup> This indicates that the character of peacebuilding today makes comparison with imperialism unavoidable.

### Redeeming Peacekeeping

Part of the reason that the comparison between imperialism and peacebuilding can be made so openly is because these varied analysts believe that peacebuilding is different from imperialism in crucial respects. The arguments against imperialism are marshalled along two axes – the aims of peacebuilding and its modalities. But in the effort to exorcize imperialism and thereby redeem peacekeeping, the defenders of peacekeeping summon a spectre more powerful than they realize. For all the assumptions that supposedly differentiate peacebuilding from imperialism can be challenged.

#### *The Aims of Peacebuilding*

Why are peacebuilding missions undertaken? Paris suggests that 'European colonialism was practised primarily to benefit the imperial states themselves', while

'the motivation behind recent peacebuilding operations is less mercenary'.<sup>15</sup> He cites a variety of factors at play – the absence of theories of racial superiority and the fact that operations are limited in time. ('No imperialists have ever been so impatient for quick results' according to Ignatieff.)<sup>16</sup> Paris even cites the great liberal anti-imperialist John Hobson in support of his arguments, the latter having supported the *mission civilisatrice* if it was to 'secure the safety and progress of... the world, and not the special interests of the interfering nation. Such interference must be attended by an improvement and elevation of the character of the people who are brought under this control'.<sup>17</sup> The overriding assumption here is that selfish motivations are the key problem to be avoided or managed.

Yet to claim that peacekeeping is disinterested, while imperialism is self-interested, is perhaps the weakest of all ways to differentiate the two. For imperialism was frequently justified by altruistic claims of spreading the benefits of progress and modernity to backward peoples incapable of realizing their own self-interests. So deeply engrained were the assumptions of imperial altruism that, for example, Lord Frederick Lugard, the British imperial administrator and theorist of colonialism felt compelled to remind his readers that British colonialism was *not* 'based on motives of philanthropy only'.<sup>18</sup> In other words, Lugard assumed that his readers did not even consider the possibility that Britain was advancing its own interests through colonial expansion. Liberal imperialism, the idea that imperial rule is justified by the backwardness of its subjects, has been a powerful legitimizing force for imperial expansion ever since the rise of modernity. To assert that it is possible to partition peacebuilding from imperialism on the basis that the former is altruistic and the latter self-interested would be to ignore the history of imperialism, and to lack objectivity. Moreover, the interests secured through peacebuilding operations seem close in their substance and rationale to justifications given for imperialism.

Among the many reasons powering imperial expansion was the need to consolidate regional security and the need to prevent local conflicts from spilling over into areas of imperial interest and influence. Such themes echo in peacekeeping today, which is often justified by the need generally to neutralize the 'externalities' associated with conflict on the periphery of the states system. The need to maintain global security and order that underpins the justification for UN peacekeeping would be familiar to imperial statesmen of yesteryear concerned with protecting global interests, even if such interests are of a lesser order than those more immediately tied to the direct use of military force associated with 'post-conquest' peacebuilding operations.

As regards the relationship between imperial political economy and peacekeeping/ peacebuilding, it is a vast topic beyond the scope of this article. But some observations are possible about the character of the claims made regarding economic interests in peacekeeping and peacebuilding. Michael Gilligan and Stephen J. Steadman have averred that the geography of peacekeeping deployments does not correlate with an imperial geopolitics, whether or not for the purposes of ensuring outside access to supplies of raw materials and primary commodities. They also maintain that peacekeepers have penetrated spheres of

influence that states had hitherto jealously defended against external intervention.<sup>19</sup> That peacekeepers have encroached on traditional great power spheres of influence – such as the US ‘backyard’ of Central America – is indeed noteworthy. To imagine that this nullifies imperialism would be to stretch credulity, however, as it would be to assume that great powers cannot bend the UN to their will. Reading these interventions against the grain, it could be argued that UN legitimacy has been purposefully stretched by great powers in order to legitimate, and thereby buttress, their imperial interventions in their traditional spheres of influence; Haiti is a case in point.<sup>20</sup>

Considered against the backdrop of imperial history, the assumption that the absence of valuable raw materials disproves imperialism is an odd one. The fact that the European empires covered vast swathes of territory around the world, including virtually the entire continent of Africa, demonstrates that empire encompassed plenty of territory that held no valuable raw materials whatsoever. Moreover, there were other economic drivers of imperialism – such as capturing economic spheres of influence, establishing privileged trading zones from which one could exclude one’s economic rivals and taxing local populations. Nor should we discount indirect economic motivations that were folded into the strategic rationale for territorial expansion, such as controlling lines of communication and consolidating territorial buffer zones for colonies that were more economically valuable.

While peacekeeping and peacebuilding may not guarantee effective access to primary commodities, this is not to say that such operations have no economic value. The ordering functions of peacebuilding are widely understood to reduce the costs of war in terms of the blood and treasure lost to conflict, as well as the general disruption to regional trade, investment and commerce. The UN itself defends peacekeeping on this basis. If the global deployment of peacekeeping operations does not map precisely onto the known deposits of strategic or valuable raw materials around the world, it does not mean that there is no economic rationale for peacekeeping. In broad terms, peacebuilding operations help reintegrate conflict-torn societies into the global economy as part of consolidating the wider ‘liberal peace’. The imperial character of such efforts need not be restricted to extracting valuable raw materials, but also resides in the fact that such operations restrict the range of economic policies and options available to post-conflict societies.<sup>21</sup>

### *The Modalities of Peacebuilding*

Multilateralism is frequently cited in the literature as an attribute of peacebuilding operations that expunges any residual or lingering traces of imperialism. While the logic underpinning such claims often varies or is left unspecified, it appears that multilateralism is seen to provide a check on the pursuit of national self-interest in these operations. The assumption seems to be therefore that to count as imperialism, such operations have to be mounted in the exclusive interests of a single state. Multilateralism here designates not only the diverse range of countries that contribute to peacebuilding and peacekeeping operations, but also the diversity of institutions involved in peacebuilding operations at the global



level. Doyle and Sambanis for example, argue that the UN's 'mere presence guarantees that partial national interests are not in control', and that the UN ethos of multilateral impartiality, state equality and universal human rights 'make the quasi-colonial presence that a multidimensional peace operation entails not only tolerable but effective'.<sup>22</sup> Marten strongly emphasizes these claims: '[m]ultilateralism is the *one thing* that *removes any hint* of individual state gain from what might otherwise appear to be a colonial effort'.<sup>23</sup>

Yet the notion that multilateralism is incompatible with imperialism is not borne out by even the most cursory survey of imperial history. Eric Ouellet cites the suppression of the so-called 'Boxer Uprising' in China by the Eight-Nation Alliance at the turn of the twentieth century as an example of 'multilateral counter-insurgency' with lessons for Western-led multinational military expeditions today.<sup>24</sup> Indeed such examples of imperial interventions and colonial policing are cited as historical precursors of peacekeeping in the leading textbook on the subject, without ostensibly being seen to call into question the validity or integrity of peacebuilding today.<sup>25</sup> There are other examples of 'multinational imperialism'. The Ottoman empire was often subject to such interventions as the great powers sought collectively to manage Turkish imperial decline.<sup>26</sup> Albania was collectively established by the great powers as an international protectorate in 1913, in order to help secure imperial interests in the Balkans (Erwin Schmidl even takes the Albanian protectorate as a model for international pacification in the Balkans today).<sup>27</sup>

One noteworthy aspect of the intervention in Shanghai was that the majority of 'British' troops sent to crush the Boxer rebellion were in fact from Britain's Indian army.<sup>28</sup> The army of the Raj often acted as Britain's imperial 'fire brigade' – a metaphor also used for UN peacekeeping – helping to buttress British rule from China to Africa.<sup>29</sup> Lord Salisbury called British India 'an English barrack in the Oriental Seas from which we may draw any number of troops without paying for them'.<sup>30</sup> It is no exaggeration to call the successor states of the Raj – India, Pakistan and Bangladesh – a UN barracks, given the extent to which South Asia contributes to current peacekeeping. Where does this leave questions of the multinational make-up of many peacebuilding operations? We shall return to this theme below.

Of course today peacebuilding multilateralism is institutionalized through the UN rather than through episodic great power cooperation. But to assume that imperial interests cannot be secured through the machinery of the UN would be naïve. As Paris himself concedes, UN missions 'still reflect the interests of the world's most powerful countries'.<sup>31</sup> To all intents and purposes the Security Council controls UN peacekeeping operations in all their fundamental aspects, led in large measure by its permanent bloc of three Western states – the United States, UK and France. Furthermore, UN peacekeeping is overwhelmingly financed by Western states.<sup>32</sup> The lack of influence that poorer troop- and police-contributing countries hold over the direction and purpose of UN peacekeeping is repeatedly emphasized by these countries, as shown in an open debate on peacekeeping held in the Security Council in August 2011. In this debate the representative of Guatemala likened peacekeeping to a 'great

outsourcing exercise, in which developed countries contracted lower-cost troops from developing countries to do the hard and dangerous work'.<sup>33</sup>

Going further, in certain instances multilateralism is the *guarantee* that imperial interests can be secured. Consider the 1960–64 UN Operation in Congo, known by its French acronym ONUC. If on the one hand the UN mission succeeded in preserving the territorial integrity of the Congolese state by suppressing those secessionists supported by European mining interests, on the other it also helped deliver the Congo to US imperial influence during the cold war. The United States recognized that in the circumstances of Third World anti-colonial revolt, direct intervention in Congo was politically impossible, and that stabilization would have to be achieved through reliance on the proxy of UN peacekeepers. As detailed by Inis Claude Jr.:

[T]he major theme [of official American commentary] was that ONUC served the interests of the whole world by helping the major powers avoid a collision in the Congo. But a significant counter-theme was woven into the composition: the United Nations action in the Congo was a means of giving the West a victory over the Soviet bloc that it might not have been able to win for itself.<sup>34</sup>

ONUC shows that if multilateralism contributes legitimacy to international military expeditions, it does not necessarily nullify their imperial character – multilateralism can justify imperialism. Yet, if the range of states on which peacekeeping draws (particularly as the majority come from poor and developing countries) is taken as an argument against imperialism, this takes us back to the question of the national composition of peacebuilding missions. The fact that UN peacekeeping is not simply 're-hatting' the military deployments of rich and powerful states is taken as evidence that it is not imperialistic. According to Cynthia Enloe 'the United Nations peacekeeping forces, drawn from the militaries of its member states, are being looked upon by the governments of many industrialized and Third World countries as offering the best hope for a genuinely post-Cold War, nonimperialist military'.<sup>35</sup>

In her survey of early post-cold war peacekeeping Laura Neack argues that one way to ensure that peacekeeping served the interests of the 'international community' rather than the self-interest of mandating states would be if peacekeeping was democratized and broadened beyond the Western powers and the narrow range of neutralist, middle powers that dominated peacekeeping during the cold war.<sup>36</sup> Neack's injunction has since been realized, as Andrea Talentino points out: '[a]nother argument against imperialism derives from the fact that states of all types promote intervention, not simply the most powerful. Indeed, if intervention relied primarily on Western or American participation it would rarely happen at all'.<sup>37</sup> As the data on the UN peacekeeping website attest, peacekeepers are diverse, with the overwhelming majority coming from poor developing countries.

But why should this distinguish peacekeeping from imperialism? As the experience of the Raj suggests, historically imperialism has relied on multiracial and multinational soldiery serving imperial centres of power. All the major

imperial powers recruited forces from their colonies, and during the world wars the British and French colonial forces grew into mass armies millions strong. Drawing on such forces expanded the pools of manpower available to imperial states in their rivalries with each other. It also helped to cement imperial rule in peacetime by allowing metropolitan powers to garrison their colonies with indigenous rather than foreign troops. Colonial armies could also be deployed to remote areas without the need to involve European soldiers in protracted conflicts that might induce war-weariness at home. As Lord Salisbury suggested, from the imperial vantage point one key advantage of colonial troops was their relative cheapness. Colonial armies could be paid less than white metropolitan soldiery and cost less to maintain. As they were most often only expected to fight against technologically inferior opponents in low intensity conflicts, they did not require modern weaponry. Each soldier in the British Indian Army cost one-quarter of what it took to maintain a British soldier. At the turn of the twentieth century a *tirailleur sénégalais* in French West Africa cost less than half of what it took to maintain a white French marine infantryman.<sup>38</sup> But also, more simply, subaltern lives were less important to metropolitan power centres.

Such themes are strongly echoed in peacekeeping and peacebuilding today: one constant refrain in Western public discourse is that of a 'bargain'. According to Susan Rice, UN ambassador for the Obama administration, for every dollar the United States spends on unilateral stabilization efforts the UN spends only 12 cents. 'That is a pretty good deal' she told the US Senate in her confirmation hearing.<sup>39</sup> Part of the reason that UN peacekeeping is cheaper is due to UN legitimacy: the nominally consensual character of UN peacekeeping means that international peacekeeping forces need not fight their way into countries or hold territory – activities that would require more manpower and larger outlays on weaponry as well as air supremacy and perhaps naval support. But the lower costs of UN peacekeeping and its intensified version, peacebuilding, can be attributed to the fact that its operations rely on the cheaper armed forces of poorer, often formerly colonized countries. According to Richard Gowan, a NATO soldier costs five times more to deploy than a UN peacekeeper.<sup>40</sup>

The diversity of nations involved in contemporary peacebuilding and peacekeeping only seems striking on the assumption that international relations is composed simply of the interaction of nation-states. If we broaden the scope of international history to include empires, then the unified coordination of large multinational armies around the globe from a single centre would appear a less novel and cosmopolitan phenomenon. As Darryl Li has pointed out, the regimental history of some armies of post-colonial states goes straight from recounting their participation in imperial campaigns to participation in UN peacekeeping operations as the forces of freshly independent states.<sup>41</sup> While today's peacekeepers represent independent states rather empires, it need not follow that imperial power relations have been entirely superseded. As Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey argue: 'imperial states and empires typically constitute significant coercive power from colonized and client populations and that force is integral to processes of globalization'.<sup>42</sup> Determining the scope of imperial power is partly a question of control: who decides the key political and strategic questions

of peacekeeping? As noted above, defenders of liberal peacebuilding themselves admit the degree of control Western states have over international institutions. Doyle notes the multi-layered power relations of British imperial rule and its reliance on indigenous forces and local power structures for its perpetuation. He suggests these as models for military intervention and post-conflict reconstruction today:

Over the longer run, indigenous forces such as the political zamindars and the King's Own African Rifles and other locally recruited military battalions (not metropolitan troops) were the forces that made imperial rule effective, that preserved a balance of local power in favour of metropolitan influence – and that kept it cheap.<sup>43</sup>

The practice of contemporary peacebuilding – particularly its emphasis on developmentalism and reconstruction – is also visible in the record of colonialism. Not unlike peacebuilding operations today, many multinational imperial interventions were not purely military. International administrations in Tangier and Shanghai enjoyed a multinational gendarmerie, complete with white police officers and reserve military units to enforce their rule. These expeditions also saw foreign-led administrative and judicial functions superimposed over local power structures.<sup>44</sup> Importantly, many of these interventions were decided through collective agreement and with extensive cooperation among the great powers. Alex J. Bellamy and Paul D. Williams cite the 1885 Congress of Berlin at which the great powers divided up Africa between them, as a precursor of UN transitional administrations today.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, one remaining significant attribute of peacebuilding that is held to distinguish it from imperialism is the former's consensual nature. Paris stresses that it is only rarely that peacekeepers deploy without the express consent of the host state or of belligerent parties.<sup>46</sup> They do not fight their way into countries or mount campaigns of conquest.

Two points can be made. First, how substantial is the consent offered in peacebuilding operations? With missions increasingly deployed under the terms of Chapter VII of the UN Charter – terms that empower peacekeepers with greater recourse to force – the meaning of consent has correspondingly narrowed. The mechanisms through which consent has been extracted have also been restructured. According to Eşref Aksu, the meaning of consent in UN peacekeeping has been crimped to a narrow, formalistic shell:

In several cases, as in Central America and Mozambique, comprehensive peace plans and agreements... extracted parties' consent not only for the initial UN deployment, but also for subsequent UN activities in the field. By carefully placing the peacekeeping mandate on peace accords, international actors increasingly downplayed the requirement of seeking consent at every stage of the operation.<sup>47</sup>

What does consent mean if it cannot be revoked, but is only extracted on a one-time basis? If consent is only extracted once, particularly in relation to a comprehensive peace agreement, it means that a greater range of externally driven

changes can be mounted throughout a host country, without requiring the formal invocation of consent again.

The second point is the assumption that consent is incompatible with empire. As a type of political order, empire is rightly understood as the opposite of autonomy and self-determination, the bases on which consent can be offered. Yet consent can also be nominal, bogus, manipulated or exercised in such restricted conditions as to be effectively meaningless. Certainly neo-imperial theorists have little trouble accommodating voluntarism and varying degrees of circumscribed 'consent' into their visions of empire.

Former British diplomat and EU foreign policy envoy Robert Cooper speaks of a 'new liberal imperialism' that involves stratification of the international order. This order is crowned by enlightened, 'postmodern' states which have renounced instincts of conquest and are bound by international cooperation, contrasted with 'modern' states selfishly focused only on their own interests, and a morass of 'premodern' states with no stable authority structures. The last group needs order implanted into them by postmodern imperialists in order to prevent the spread of disorder. According to Cooper, this is 'an imperialism which, like all imperialism, aims to bring order and organisation but which rests today on the *voluntary* principle'.<sup>48</sup>

Ignatieff describes contemporary imperialism 'as an empire lite', a 'hegemony without colonies', a 'global sphere of influence without the burden of direct administration and the risks of daily policing'.<sup>49</sup> Much like Cooper, Ignatieff sees the target of imperialism to be 'a vacuum of chaos and massacre', emanating security threats that draw in reluctant outsiders to impose stability through imperial order.<sup>50</sup> Ignatieff too sees consent as integral to this project, harkening back to the experience of the British Empire: '[w]hat the history of the British Empire shows is that self-determination and imperial rule are *not* incompatible. . . promising self-government has always served as a key instrument in maintaining control'.<sup>51</sup>

Ignatieff and Cooper largely restrict their discussion of modern imperialism to Western-led and 'post-conquest' peacebuilding efforts: Cooper is primarily concerned with EU nation-building efforts in the Balkans, while Ignatieff sees his 'humanitarian empire' in the mixture of peacebuilding initiatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Afghanistan. Yet by the criteria offered by Cooper and Ignatieff, UN post-settlement peacebuilding would offer the model of a more successful imperium, in so far as it has undertaken efforts in a wider variety of countries more consistently since the end of the cold war. Much like the visions offered by Cooper and Ignatieff, UN peacebuilding operations have helped to produce 'sub-sovereign' states locked into international institutions that help to control remote zones of instability on the periphery of great powers' concerns.

### *Summary*

Summarising the discussion so far, the first point to note is that the imperialism against which peacekeeping and peacebuilding are favourably compared is understood to be a historical rather than a contemporary phenomenon. Given that

peacekeeping is an aspect of contemporary international affairs, one might assume that contemporary rather than historical discussions of imperialism would be the most useful resource from which to mount a comparison. Yet this is not the case: discussions about the dynamics of imperial power today are simply ignored in these discussions of peacebuilding, despite the extent and theoretical sophistication of many discussions of imperialism in the contemporary international relations literature. Indeed, no theories of imperialism – historical or contemporary – are engaged with in the peacekeeping and peacebuilding literature, nor is any of the complex historiography regarding the nature and purpose of imperial expansion. One could argue that the terms of the debate have been weighted in favour of peacebuilding because imperialism is understood to be something that belongs to history rather than being of the present.

But to go further, even by the standards of historical comparison, the discussion of imperialism in peacekeeping studies is remarkably limited. It could be said that each of the arguments discussed above sets up a caricature of imperialism, the easier to cut it down. Of all the claims made for peacekeeping, among the most important is that multilateralism signals the absence of selfish motivation. The absence of private benefits from peacebuilding operations monopolistically accruing to a single imperial state allows analysts to accept the universalistic rhetoric that accompanies peacebuilding operations.

*Intention* then, seems to be the main measure of the legitimacy of peacebuilding. But why is intention the standpoint for assessing the legitimacy of a particular political practice? The legitimacy of the practice seems to be proved negatively: peacebuilding is legitimate not because of what it is, but because of what it is not (classical nineteenth century imperialism). Not only is this *not* a positive case for peacebuilding, it could be read as an evasion of the very question of standards of assessment.

### Imperial Peacebuilding

Peacebuilding can be seen as imperial in the way in which it restricts the range of options available to post-conflict societies. Paris for example is sensitive to the way in which the choices made by peacekeepers impose ‘relatively narrow limits on the type of polity and economy that will be allowed to emerge’ (though he is willing to countenance such authoritarianism).<sup>52</sup> It is true of course in the formal sense that, if the activities of national governments are absorbed by the UN, this will tend to ‘crowd out’ the room for ‘indigenous’ and ‘participatory’ activities by people in the host state. Any technical, externally imposed programme will tend to reduce the scope for innovation and political creativity in the work of building post-conflict institutions.

Yet in so far as imperialism and peacekeeping operations *are* historically distinct, it is not clear that these differences make peacebuilding a preferable form of international intervention. To be sure, peacekeepers are not deployed to annex territory to metropolitan states. Even in the most extreme instances of ‘proxy governance’, where UN viceroys have substituted for local rulers such as in Cambodia, Kosovo and East Timor, the aim has not been to snuff out the formal



independence of these territories for good. But for that very reason, one could argue that peacebuilding operations constitute a more insidious exercise of imperial power. The old aspects of imperialism – colonies, mandates, trusteeships – were all based on the recognition that external rule and tutelage were incompatible with self-determination – hence the explicit revocation of self-determination put off as a glittering goal for a distant future. Peacebuilding by contrast is predicated on the notion that ‘proxy governance’ is compatible with substantive national independence, and that the machinery of government can be annexed by ‘internationals’ without prejudice to the practice of self-determination.

How are political structures of responsibility and accountability to be established under such circumstances? When it is more difficult to attribute political responsibility, then a situation arises that was eloquently described (appropriately enough) by the former UN Under Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations from 2000 to 2008, Jean-Marie Guéhenno, thus:

There [is] not a statue. . . to pull down from its pedestal, only the amorphous mass of a diffuse and imperceptible power. The new order makes policemen of us all, and there is no longer a police chief against whom we may direct our revolt. We are deprived not of liberty, but of the idea of liberty.<sup>53</sup>

But the problem lies not only in the fact that peacebuilding is insinuated into the operation of nominally independent states, but also with the justification given for the political choices made in peacebuilding – the dissemination of pre-given techniques and standards. Guéhenno argues that ‘[t]here are no longer great decisions from which proceed lesser ones. . . [and] traditional political debate, a debate about principles and general ideas, an ideological debate, a debate over how society is to be organised, fades away, or rather crumbles’.<sup>54</sup> Peacebuilding by its nature is based on the acceptance of a distinctive set of political institutions and values – those of the liberal peace.

Rather than facilitating mediation and resolution between competing political or national projects, the UN now facilitates conformity with one political order, the ‘liberal peace’: liberal government and market society. This consensus is taken to be beyond challenge: economic, legal and political models of governance that are all so well established and entrenched that they are assumed to be self-evidently good and enjoy universal support, thereby obviating the need for assent. In this way, decisions about political order and social organization are assumed to be a given. As Guéhenno argues, ‘It matters little whether a norm is imposed. . . by a committee of bureaucrats. It is no longer the expression of a sovereignty, but simply something that reduces uncertainties, a means of lowering the costs of transactions, of increasing transparency [sic]’.<sup>55</sup>

### UN Peacebuilding and Modern Imperialism

Empire remains, therefore, a remarkably under-utilized concept in the study of peacekeeping and peacebuilding. Although Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri see the UN as offering a conceptual bridge across which the imperialism of

nation states is scaled up into Empire, the nebulous categories of their thin theory do not easily meld with the reality of peacebuilding operations.<sup>56</sup> As Alejandro Colás points out, peacebuilding operations are focused on rearticulating a decentralized international order based around independent states, not dissolving states into a transnational political order.<sup>57</sup> Although David Chandler by contrast addresses state-building directly as a new type of imperial politics, he does not specifically differentiate between post-conquest and post-settlement peacebuilding, and focuses on state- and EU-led rather than UN-led peacebuilding operations.<sup>58</sup>

If we examine the scholarly literature on imperialism, the most obvious defining feature that recurs is the existence of a hierarchical relation between distinct political units, with asymmetric power relations that effectively restrict the autonomy of the subordinated society. This unequal relationship can be formally constituted via institutions that ensure that the subordinate society is directly ruled by the political institutions of the imperial state, or via informal power relations – whereby the subordinate society is nominally independent but where crucial policy questions are determined in a sustained and systematic fashion by the imperial state.<sup>59</sup>

Empires may adopt inclusionary or exclusionary strategies in their relations with local elites. In his classic study of empire, Doyle stresses the varieties of imperial and informal political dependence as achieved variously through force, collaboration or non-political forms of dependence (economic, social or cultural).<sup>60</sup> Moreover, imperial power structures typically involve a variegated hierarchy, with imperial power centres enjoying heterogeneous relations with different types of subordinate societies, the better to disable collective action or self-organization by the subordinated societies.<sup>61</sup>

UN peacebuilding fits both the visions of international order offered by neo-imperialist theorists and the broad characterizations of empire offered in the academic literature on the topic as synthesized above. Empire is thus a fruitful device for understanding the dynamics of peacekeeping in the international order today, and on the basis of the current literature, there is no reason not to read peacekeeping against the backdrop of empire and imperial history. A decade ago Paris argued that the study of peacekeeping would be enriched by being plugged into mainstream discussion of international relations and international relations theorizing.<sup>62</sup> Today the study of peacekeeping and peacebuilding would benefit no less from drawing on the theoretical and historical discussion of imperial power in international affairs.

## Conclusion

Almost by default, the expansion of peacebuilding in the contemporary world spontaneously conjures up the spectre of imperialism: peacekeepers are sent to pacify unruly but ultimately marginal territories, using deterrence and force, and propagating ideals and institutions that are consonant with the values espoused by the most powerful members of the international system. The similarities cannot be ignored. The purpose of this article was not to argue that



peacebuilding and historical imperialism are perfectly symmetrical; rather that the existing attempts in the literature to differentiate peacebuilding from imperialism, and thereby legitimate the former, are weak and unconvincing.

That it is fairly straight-forward to puncture the claims made for the supposedly post-imperial character of peacebuilding shows that the extant discussion in peacekeeping studies is not particularly rigorous or well informed. It also suggests that if peacebuilding can indeed be conceptually assimilated to a long history of imperial practice in international politics, it also represents a refined form of imperialism, whereby extensive international influence over, and penetration of, domestic political systems is not seen as mutually exclusive of self-determination.

As we have seen, the use of the imperial analogy in peacekeeping studies deploys a crude construct as a stand-in for imperialism, ignoring the suppleness and versatility of imperial domination in world politics, as well as the broad range of theories used to study it. If peacebuilding would benefit from a more systematic and rigorous engagement with theories of empire, the converse is equally true: the study of peacebuilding would help broaden debates about contemporary imperialism, forcing scholars and students of modern empire to cast their gaze further than the machinations of US power, and to consider the rise of imperial multilateralism and the institutions it deploys. In so far as UN interventions and post-settlement peacebuilding initiatives still accrue greater legitimacy than unilateral interventions and post-conquest peacebuilding, it is high time that the former was subject to greater scrutiny.

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#### NOTES

1. On definitional issues, see below.
2. Roland Paris, 'Saving Liberal Peacebuilding', *Review of International Studies*, Vol.35, No.3, 2010, p.348. I use this definition of post-settlement peacebuilding in here. Henceforward, unless specified otherwise, references to 'peacebuilding' can be assumed to refer to Paris's definition of post-settlement UN peacebuilding.
3. Michael Ignatieff, *Empire Lite: Nation-Building in Bosnia, Kosovo and Afghanistan*, London: Vintage, 2003.
4. Julian Glover, 'King Paddy', *Guardian* [London] 11 Oct. 2002 (at: [www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2002/oct/11/foreignpolicy.uk](http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2002/oct/11/foreignpolicy.uk)).
5. Kimberly Marten, *Enforcing the Peace: Learning from the Imperial Past*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, p.17.
6. Roland Paris, 'International Peacebuilding and the "Mission Civilisatrice"', *Review of International Studies*, Vol.28, No.4, 2002, pp.643–4.
7. *Ibid.*, p.650.
8. Marten (see n.5 above).
9. *Ibid.*
10. Michael W. Doyle and Nicolas Sambanis, *Making War and Building Peace: United Nations Peace Operations*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006, p.318.
11. Simon Chesterman, *You, the People: The United Nations, Transitional Administration and State-building*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, p.1.

12. Ignatieff (see n.3 above), p.2.
13. Ibid., p.3.
14. The most notable examples are: David N. Gibbs 'Is Peacekeeping a New Form of Imperialism?', *International Peacekeeping*, Vol.4, No.1, 1997, pp.122–28; Sharene H. Razack, *Dark Threats and White Knights: The Somalia Affair, Peacekeeping and the New Imperialism*, Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2004.
15. Paris (see n.6 above), p.638.
16. Ignatieff (see n.3 above), p.115.
17. Hobson, cited in Paris (see n.6 above), p. 651.
18. See H.L. Wesseling, 'Editorial: Changing Views on Empire and Imperialism', *European Review*, Vol.12, No.3, 2004, p.268.
19. Michael Gilligan and Stephen J. Steadman, 'Where do Peacekeepers Go?', *International Studies Review*, Vol.5, No.4, 2003, pp.37–54. The claim that peacekeeping has correlated with imperial interest in economic plunder has been made in relation to Somalia and Cold War-era UN activity in the Middle East. See Gibbs (see n.14 above); Hirofumi Shimizu, 'An Economic Analysis of the UN Peacekeeping Assessment System', *Defence and Peace Economics*, Vol.16, No.1, 2005, p.2. John Pilger made a similar claim in respect of the British support to the UN operation in diamond-rich Sierra Leone. 'Britain is Recolonising Sierra Leone in an Attempt to get its Hands on the Country's Diamonds', *New Statesman* [London], 18 Sept. 2000. Neither claim is particularly convincing in its original formulation.
20. See Mohammed Ayooob, 'Humanitarian Intervention and State Sovereignty', *International Journal of Human Rights*, Vol.6, No.1, 2002, p.87.
21. See Michael Pugh, 'The Political Economy of Peacebuilding: A Critical Theory Perspective', *International Journal of Peace Studies*, Vol.10, No.2, 2005, pp.23–42.
22. Doyle and Sambanis (see n.10 above), p. 318.
23. Marten (see n.5 above), p.19 (emphasis added).
24. Eric Ouellet, 'Multinational Counterinsurgency: The Western Intervention in the Boxer Rebellion 1900–1901', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol.20, No.3–4, 2009, pp.507–27.
25. See Alex J. Bellamy and Paul D. Williams with Stuart Griffin, *Understanding Peacekeeping*, Cambridge: Polity, 2010, ch.3.
26. Interestingly, some of these nineteenth century expeditions against the Ottoman Empire are also cited as prototypes of humanitarian intervention. There are earlier examples from the nineteenth century too, such as military cooperation between the European powers against the Barbary pirates until 1830. Schmidl also covers the counter-revolutionary interventions of the Congress and Holy Alliance powers in Europe itself. Erwin Schmidl, 'The Evolution of Peace Operations since the Nineteenth Century', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol.10, No.2, 1999, pp.4–20.
27. Erwin Schmidl, 'The International Operation in Albania 1913–14', *International Peacekeeping*, Vol.6, No.3, 1999, pp.1–10.
28. David Killingray, 'Guardians of Empire', in Killingray (ed.), *Guardians of Empire: The Armed Forces of the Colonial Powers, c. 1700–1964*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999, p.4.
29. Ibid, p.7.
30. Cited in Alex Callinicos, *Imperialism and Global Political Economy*, Cambridge: Polity, 2009, p.194.
31. Paris (see n.2 above), pp.349–50.
32. See, for example, Khrusav Gaibulloev, Todd Sandler and Hirofumi Shimizu, 'Demands for UN and Non-UN Peacekeeping: Nonvoluntary versus Voluntary Contributions to a Public Good', *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol.53, No.6, 2009, pp.827–52.
33. UN Security Council, 'Security Council Commits to Strengthening Partnership with Troop, Police Contributors in Debate on United Nations Peacekeeping Operations', 26 Aug. 2011, UN doc., SC/10368 (at: [www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2011/sc10368.doc.htm](http://www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2011/sc10368.doc.htm)).
34. Inis L. Claude, Jr, *Swords into Plowshares: The Problems and Progress of International Organization*, New York: Random House, 1971, pp.329–30.
35. Cynthia Enloe, *The Morning After: Sexual Politics at the End of the Cold War*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993, p.30.
36. Laura Neack, 'UN Peace-Keeping: In the Interest of Community or Self?', *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol.32, No.2, 1995, pp.181–96.
37. Andrea K. Talentino, *Military Intervention after the Cold War: The Evolution of Theory and Practice*, Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2005, p.89. Andrew Blum argues on similar lines that while it is fairly easy to account for the conflict management activities of wealthy and powerful states, the activity of poorer peacekeeping countries is less obvious. See Andrew Blum, "Blue

- Helmets from the South”: Accounting for the Participation of Weaker States in United Nations Peacekeeping Operations’, *Journal of Conflict Studies*, Vol.20, No.1, 2000, p.1.
38. Killingray (see n.28), p.7.
  39. Neil Macfarquar, ‘Gentle Questioning for U.N. Nominee’, *New York Times*, 15 Jan. 2009 (at: [www.nytimes.com/2009/01/16/us/16webrice.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/16/us/16webrice.html)).
  40. Richard Gowan, ‘UN Peace Operations: The Case for Strategic Investment’, Berlin: Centre for International Peace Operations, Aug. 2010, p.2 (at: [www.zif-berlin.org/fileadmin/uploads/analyse/dokumente/veroeffentlichungen/Policy\\_Briefing\\_Richard\\_Gowan\\_Aug\\_2010\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.zif-berlin.org/fileadmin/uploads/analyse/dokumente/veroeffentlichungen/Policy_Briefing_Richard_Gowan_Aug_2010_ENG.pdf)).
  41. Darryl Li, ‘Peacekeepers and the Countries That Send Them’, unpublished manuscript, 2003, p.6.
  42. Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, ‘The Imperial Peace: Democracy, Force and Globalization’, *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol.5, No.4, 1999, p.414.
  43. Michael Doyle, ‘The New Interventionism’, *Metaphilosophy*, Vol.32, No.1–2, 2001, p.227.
  44. Larry Fabian, *Soldiers without Enemies: Preparing the United Nations for Peacekeeping*, Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1971, pp.43–4. Fabian calls these early ‘adumbrations’ of peacekeeping.
  45. Bellamy and Williams (see n.25 above), p.76.
  46. Paris (see n.6 above), p.652.
  47. Eşref Aksu, *The United Nations, Intra-State Peacekeeping and Normative Change*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003, p.92.
  48. Robert Cooper, ‘The New Liberal Imperialism’, *Observer* [London], 7 April 2002 (emphasis added).
  49. Ignatieff (see n.3 above), p.2.
  50. *Ibid.*, p.21.
  51. *Ibid.*, p.114.
  52. Roland Paris, ‘Broadening the Study of Peace Operations’, *International Studies Review*, Vol.2, No.2, 2000, p.43.
  53. It should be noted that Guéhenno wrote those words in a previous capacity as French ambassador to the EU. From Guéhenno, *The End of the Nation-State*, London and Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1993, pp.121–2.
  54. *Ibid.*, pp.19–20.
  55. *Ibid.*, p.56.
  56. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.
  57. Alejandro Colas, *Empire*, London: Polity, 2007, p.176.
  58. David Chandler, *Empire in Denial: The Politics of State-building*, London: Pluto Press, 2006.
  59. See further, Yale H. Ferguson, ‘Approaches to Defining “Empire” and Characterizing United States Influence in the Contemporary World’, *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol.9, No.3, 2008, p. 274.
  60. Michael W. Doyle, *Empires*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986, p.45.
  61. Hendrik Spruyt, ‘“American Empire” as an Analytic Question or a Rhetorical Move?’, *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol.9, No.3, 2008, p.293.
  62. Paris (see n.52 above), *passim*.