



ARTICLES

The *Work of Peace*: History, Imperialism, and Peacekeeping

ANGELA THOMPSELL

Militarization and Securitization in Africa: The Role of Sino-American Geostrategic Presence

EARL CONTEH-MORGAN

Cloud on the Horizon: African Migration, Transnationalism, and Social Osmosis

JOSEPH J. BANGURA

Terrorism in Africa: The Rise of Islamist Extremism and Jihadism

HAYAT ALVI

Iran's Scramble for Sub-Saharan Africa

JEFFREY A. LEFEBVRE

No Questions Asked? Development and the Paradox of China's Africa Policy

FODEI BATTY

Re-examining the "Base": The Political and Security Dimensions of Turkey's Military Presence in Somalia

ASH ROSSITER and BRENDON J. CANNON

The U.S. War on Terror Discourse: Mapping De-politicization and the Politics of Confinement in Afghanistan

PAMIR H. SAHILL

The Work of Peace: History, Imperialism, and Peacekeeping

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ABSTRACT *The size and complexity of recent peacebuilding mandates have led scholars to liken these efforts to imperialism, but most are quick to dismiss any deeper comparison. This article argues against such assumptions by using the 1884-1885 Berlin West Africa Conference and the Congo Free State crisis to show that the Scramble for Africa fits within the definition of multilateralism and that European imperialism was, at the time, also seen as a humanitarian endeavor. Peacebuilding and imperialism are very different enterprises, but acknowledging their connections enables peacekeepers to draw lessons from the imperial past and better understand its continued implications for the present. The article also considers how imperial scholarship can inform efforts to increase civic participation in peacebuilding as well as the way we think about and categorize peacebuilding in Africa.*

Introduction

The end of the Cold War dramatically altered the landscape of international peacekeeping, particularly in Africa. In the four decades between 1948 and 1988, there were only thirteen United Nations (UN) peacekeeping missions, two of which addressed African conflicts, whereas there have been 58 missions since that time, 30 of which were in Africa.¹ Many of those more recent missions have also been substantial, requiring thousands of personnel and massive financial outlays. The overall cost of African missions has been well in excess of \$36 billion.² Peacekeeping is now “big business for the leading state funders of UN missions”³ and, like international aid, has become an important axis for engaging with African countries and building regional connections.

The changing realities of peacekeeping have raised new questions about the intrusive nature of peacebuilding and its similarities to 19th and 20th century imperialism. Before addressing those connections, it is helpful to consider why peacekeeping changed in 1989. As the date suggests, the end of the Cold War was a critical factor, but the antagonism between the United States (U.S.) and

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the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) only made multilateral peacekeeping difficult, not impossible.⁴ By way of comparison, there were seven missions to the Middle East between 1948 and 1988, and only three since.⁵ To understand the remarkable uptick in the number and scope of peacekeeping missions in Africa specifically, one must consider the changing notions of state sovereignty and the nature of conflicts on the continent.

In 1963, once the majority of African states had gained independence, they formed the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and agreed to treat the boundaries drawn during the colonial era as inviolable, a policy very few states violated.⁶ Consequently, most conflicts in Africa were internal affairs, at least when they began. In several cases, foreign states, such as the former imperial powers and the U.S. and the USSR, subsidized or armed factions that supported their competing agendas. Such interference extended and exacerbated these conflicts, but they were still considered to be civil matters. This classification placed such conflicts beyond the purview of the United Nations because its Charter explicitly states that the organization is not authorized to intervene in “matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state” except in the case of an “act of aggression” or “threat to the peace.”⁷ Before 1989, the international community did not consider intra-state conflicts or human rights abuses as qualifying for this exception to the policy of non-interference.⁸

That changed with the end of the Cold War, and just as multilateral operations became more feasible, many states embraced a post-Westphalian view of sovereignty that permitted interventions to protect human rights.⁹ This shift was most evident among Western states, but African governments also loosened their stance on sovereignty and dissolved the OAU in 2002 to form a more interventionist body, the African Union (AU).¹⁰ By that point, growing fears of international terrorism had further amplified the global community’s willingness to intervene in intra-state conflicts, as they now saw embattled states as potential breeding grounds of extremism and thus grave threats to international peace.

For these reasons, the United Nations and other regional blocs began authorizing more peacekeeping missions and greatly extending their mandates. Unlike earlier peacekeeping missions that sought to secure and enforce ceasefires, today’s peacebuilding operations aim to prevent future violence by supporting post-conflict reconciliations and encouraging democratization. Without doubt, the record has been mixed, but research shows that such missions increase the probability of a lasting peace.¹¹

The new, extended parameters of peacekeeping operations have also led, however, to frequent comparisons between today’s peacebuilding efforts and the “colonial occupations” of the early 20th century.¹² The macroscale similari-

ties are striking. Like imperialism, peacebuilding in Africa has been traditionally spearheaded by Western nations and has entailed foreign experts working with African elites to restructure governments, bringing them more in line with Western norms. (By way of contrast, China, a relatively new actor in peacekeeping, promotes “cooperative” development and avoids efforts to liberalize or reform host countries’ governments.)¹³ The political economy of peacekeeping has also meant that Western countries, acting through the UN or European Union, have been the primary funders of missions, even those under the auspices of the African Union. While China’s increased participation has altered the landscape, Western powers continue to exert significant influence over operation strategies and mandates.

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These trends are in addition to the historical connections between imperialism and international peacekeeping. As Bruno Charbonneau recently argued, many of the structures, networks, and power dynamics of peacebuilding derive from colonial interactions.¹⁴ The very ideas that shape interventions into collapsed states and disputed regions can also be traced back to an imperial precedent, the notion of trusteeship articulated at the Berlin West African Conference, which later evolved into the League of Nations Mandate system and United Nations Trust territories.¹⁵ Peacekeeping and imperialism are not just analogous, they are deeply interrelated.

Yet what is perhaps even more remarkable is the casual way in which scholars tend to brush aside the “specter of imperialism” in peacekeeping literature. The overwhelming assumption has been that the multilateral nature and humanitarian aims of peacekeeping make it unambiguously distinct from imperial occupation, but to quote Philip Cunliffe, such “claims are unconvincing because they rely on under-theorized and historically impoverished understandings of empire.”¹⁶ Imperialism has been the straw man of peacebuilding.

This article expands on Cunliffe’s critique by bringing a historian’s perspective to bear on the question of African imperialism. The following discussion argues that the Scramble for Africa itself fits within the definition of multilateralism used in peacekeeping literature. The General Act signed at the Berlin Conference may have imposed few obligations or restrictions, but the agreement codified liberal principles that guided the colonization of Africa without respect to particular cases. It turned the imperialist claim that European conquest and rule was a humanitarian effort into an obligation that was

Empires did little to better the well-being of African people, but that was not how their actions were perceived at the time, at least by the major powers. It was this belief in the benefits of imperialism that served as the principle agreed upon in the General Act, and the piece that was “indivisible”

draw a new line in the sand between the two forms of intervention, but rather to initiate a more engaged discussion between the literatures. Better understanding the imperial past and its connections to the present will help peacekeepers avoid replicating imperial-esque approaches. The similarities between the two types of interventions also make the past a useful guide. Thus, after exploring the multilateral and humanitarian sides of imperialism, this article will consider how imperial history can inform one recent trend in peacebuilding practice, namely increased civic participation in conflict resolution. It will then close by considering why so many studies address peacekeeping specifically in Africa and how even something as simple as that categorization unintentionally reifies imperialist ideas and relations.

Multilateral Imperialism

The very term multilateral imperialism may seem like an oxymoron, particularly during the era of New Imperialism (c. 1870-1919), when European empires competed against each other in their efforts to assert dominion over nearly every part of the globe. Governments at that time saw imperial expansion as a zero-sum game, resulting in a rush for power and profit through formal conquest and other indirect means of asserting dominance over states. Yet as the following discussion illustrates, the Scramble for Africa occurred within a shared framework that the major empires saw as regulating their actions and guaranteeing their common security and which fits –if uneasily– within the definition of qualitative multilateralism famously advocated by John Ruggie.

During the era of New Imperialism, there were several inter-imperial coalitions, such as the Eight-Nation Alliance formed to fight the Boxer Rebellion in China.¹⁷ Philip Cunliffe identifies this alliance as an example of imperial multi-

enforced during the Congo reform campaign. There is little doubt that today’s peacebuilding is very different from 19th and 20th century imperialism, but the distinctions are not as simple or clear-cut as the present literature suggests.

The aim of this analysis is not to delegitimize international intervention, but rather to show how a historical lens can add to the critical evaluation of and recommendations for peacekeeping practices. It also, therefore, does not seek to



lateralism, but it was only nominally multilateral.¹⁸ The alliance involved eight governments united in a common goal, namely defeating the Boxers and protecting their economic and strategic interests in China. Such efforts may be the “historical precursors of peacekeeping,”¹⁹ but they were still alliances created in response to a particular, shared threat. It is precisely because such alliances—whether bilateral or multinational—can fit within a “nominal” definition of multilateralism that John Ruggie famously advocated for a tighter, “qualitative” understanding, which is used here to consider the nature of imperial relations in the conquest of Africa.²⁰

As Ruggie defined it, qualitative multilateralism is “an institutional form which coordinates relations among three or more states on the basis of ‘generalized’ principles of conduct—that is, principles which specify appropriate conduct for a class of actions, without regard to the particularistic interests of the parties or the strategic exigencies” of the moment.²¹ Ruggie did not see imperialism as falling within this definition. For him, imperialism represented another type of state coordination, but he was thinking in terms of the coordination imperial centers imposed on “subject states” who lacked the sovereign right to act independently.²² Other scholars have followed his lead.²³

There were, however, principles governing the relations between empires. These were at times implicit, but the General Act ratified at the 1884-1885 Berlin Conference established an explicit set of provisions governing trade and conquest in Africa without regard to individual cases.²⁴ Under the terms gov-

A UN peacekeeper stands guard at a newly established base in the Djug area of Ituri, Democratic Republic of the Congo, on March 27, 2018.

ALEX MCBRIDE /
AFP / Getty Images

erning the acquisition of territories, for instance, it did not matter which power claimed a colony, the perceived value of that territory, or which other signatories' interests might be threatened by that move. The only requirements for an occupation "to be effective" were that an imperial power establishes authority in the territory and notify the other powers. Similarly, the articles regarding slavery obliged participant countries to use any means in their power to end the slave trade, whether or not it was in their interest to do so in particular cases.²⁵ While imperial governments tacitly permitted slave trading when it suited their interests and they could plausibly deny knowledge of it, the Congo crisis shows that the General Act's provisions were not without substance. Public pressure ensured that there were penalties for gross violations of the underlying principles that many Western Europeans believed governed imperial rule, and which were formally recognized and ratified at the Berlin Conference.

The competition to colonize Africa had begun earlier, in the mid-1870s, but by 1884, many feared that the growing imperial rivalry would impede trade and shatter the international balance of power. Citing these concerns, the German chancellor, Otto von Bismark, called for a "West African Conference" not to divvy up Africa on the spot as many erroneously believe, but to establish rules governing the future division of the continent. The bilateral treaties signed between powers over the course of the conference established some territorial boundaries and spheres of influence, but the respective governments still considered much of the continent's interior, or hinterlands as the Act called it, to be in play when the conference concluded.²⁶ Moreover, what drew many plenipotentiaries to the table was not colonial conquest per se but the chance to protect international trade opportunities in Africa, particularly along the Niger and Congo Rivers.

The desire to profit from Africa's potential markets was not limited to states with expansionary aims on the continent. Russia, the United States, Denmark, Sweden-Norway, and Austria-Hungary all participated in the conference looking to expand their trade, strengthen their position in European politics, and/or assert their status as a "relevant" power. Research on the impact these countries had on conference negotiations is lacking,²⁷ but their ratification of the Act meant that the international order established therein reached beyond colonial expansion in Africa to encompass a broader set of political, economic, and cultural relations with Africa. This was not a pact between victors, but an international order for regulating future engagements with Africa.


One is tempted to say the Act regulated *European* relations with Africa, but one of the most overlooked participants at the conference was the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman, much like the Russian Empire, fits unevenly in any sharp East-West divide, but other participants at the time saw the Ottomans as an Eastern empire.²⁸ It is, therefore, worth pausing for a moment to consider

what their participation suggests about states' expectations from and perceptions of the Act to which they agreed.

From the Ottoman perspective, the conference held more risk than perhaps for any other state. They had long held territories in North Africa, but their empire was in a period of decline and its frontiers had become a favored hunting ground of other empires. At first blush, the Act of Berlin furthered this state of affairs. Under the terms of the Act, the Ottoman Empire effectively recognized France's authority over two territories, Algeria and Tunisia, which the Ottomans had long claimed as their own, but Mostafa Minawi has recently argued that the Act offered benefits that outweighed this cost.²⁹ First, it implicitly recognized Ottoman control over large sections of present-day Libya (Tripolitania and Cyrenaica). Second, the 'sphere of influence' and 'hinterland' concepts that were embedded in the agreement provided an opportunity for extending the Ottoman Empire southward. Finally, and more indirectly, being party to the Act increased their security; it marked them as a civilized power at a time when being deemed un- or semi-civilized threw one's sovereignty into question.³⁰ Put another way, Ottoman officials saw the Act as offering what John Ruggie called the "diffuse reciprocity" of multilateral agreements.³¹ They believed or at least hoped that while the initial balance sheet registered a loss, the principles formalized by the Act would benefit them in the long term.

The Ottoman Empire's gamble did not pay off. They were unable to extend their control, and in 1911, Italy –acting with the support of Britain, France, and Russia– successfully waged war against the Ottoman Empire for its territories in Libya.³² The Berlin Act did not actually prohibit such wars between signatory states, but the Act was intended to prevent "disputes" over territories. In that sense, the Italo-Turkish war violated the spirit of the Act, with no repercussions for Italy. This raises the question of how meaningful the Berlin Conference actually was. Did the resulting act have "substance," one of Ruggie's characteristics of multilateralism? And if it did, were the provisions "indivisible," that is, were they applied equally?³³

From the perspective of legal history, the General Act established an architecture for conquest and an important precedent for future multilateral agreements. Historians have been more prone to point to the Act's failings: it estab-



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lished no rules to govern conquest itself and had no provisions for enforcing its regulations.³⁴ Yet, the provisions of the Act *were* enforced during the Congo crisis. An international reform campaign forced the transfer of the Congo Free State to the Belgian government, which was expected to rule the colony in greater accordance with the vision of imperialism articulated in the General Act. Considering that 25 of the Act's 38 articles addressed trade, access, and development in the Congo River basin and its “circumjacent” regions, the successful campaign against the Congo Free State represents a significant enforcement of the General Act.³⁵

Moreover, the issue at stake in the Congo crisis was the humanitarian face of imperialism. Colonial occupation was to bring the benefits of “civilization” to Africa and further “the moral and material well-being of the native population.”³⁶ To be sure, empires did little to better the well-being of African people, but that was not how their actions were perceived at the time, at least by the major powers. It was this belief in the benefits of imperialism that served as the principle agreed upon in the General Act, and the piece that was “indivisible.” The humanitarian justifications of occupation served as the linchpin that held the imperial enterprise together, bringing a wide range of people, including even some colonized elites, to support imperial expansion. How people squared this humanitarian ideology with the brutal violence and self-interest embedded in colonial policies is key to understanding imperialism and its deeper similarities to peacebuilding.

The Work of Peace

Many scholars and peacekeepers believe that the humanitarian goals of peacebuilding distinguish the practice from the naked self-interest of imperialism. This line of reasoning represents a fundamental misunderstanding of imperialism, but also an idealized vision of peacebuilding. At the very least, governments justify funding for peacekeeping partly on the basis of self-interest. In our globalized world, violence and insecurity anywhere can affect prosperity and peace everywhere. Thus, while there are many individuals who support intervention on moral grounds, governments also see peacekeeping in terms of their own security and development. For individual countries and regional blocks, peacekeeping also represents a way to build networks and gain favor.³⁷ One recent external brief concluded frankly that in order to remain “an important security player on the African continent,” the European Union will need to reconsider

its strategies and approach, lest “other actors, like China... [strengthen] their influence... in ways that would marginalize the EU’s role on the continent.”³⁸

This concern with influence and markets is just as important for understanding modern peacekeeping as the humanitarian facet of European imperialism was for understanding colonial conquest and rule in Africa. Europeans at the time believed they had a right and an obligation to propagate their supposedly superior cultures and styles of government. The French, for instance, trumpeted their republican government and heritage as the birthplace of the rights of man. The British spoke of bringing law and order to the world while spreading the “3Cs:” Civilization, Commerce, and Christianity. This rhetoric was not merely a disguise for more ruthless goals. The belief that Europe’s empires were bringing good government and a brighter, more prosperous future to the continent shaped colonial policy,³⁹ making the connection to today’s liberal peace all the more striking.

How, though, did imperial agents reconcile these beliefs with the forced labor, exploitation, and violence of colonialism? The basic answer is racism. Even progressives believed that violence was a potentially necessary step to spreading civilization. Indeed, humanitarianism justified imperial conquest precisely because so many people believed that the ‘savage’ or ‘primitive’ people of the world would not embrace ‘civilization’ unless forced to do so.⁴⁰ This was what Rudyard Kipling referred to as the “savage wars of peace.”⁴¹ There was also a difference between beliefs in Europe and colonial practices in Africa. For officials on the ground, concerns about security and power could eclipse the aspirational goal of civilizing, but most still believed that the promised ends justified the brutal means. At times this required remarkable mental gymnastics, but ultimately imperial agents reconciled “what they needed to believe ideologically” with the physical and cultural violence they employed.⁴²

The Civilizing Mission had to be something more than a mask, and this is why the Congo Reform campaign struck such a chord. The Congo River basin, as defined by the General Act, was a vast territory a quarter the size of the European continent. (The modern day Democratic Republic of the Congo, which is roughly the same size as its colonial predecessor, is the 11th largest country in the world). The Act made this region a free trade zone, opened the river to ships from all countries, and obliged any “powers exercising sovereign rights” there to “protect and favor all religious, scientific or charitable institutions and undertakings” in the territory of whatever “creed or nation.”⁴³

While the Act was coy about who would govern this region, a series of bilateral agreements conducted over the course of the conference awarded that sovereignty to King Leopold II and his amorphous International Association of the Congo. Several histories detail how Leopold II managed to claim such



268 Chinese peacekeepers attend a ceremony before leaving for the South Sudan on September 5, 2018 in Zhengzhou, Henan Province of China.
VCG / Getty Images

a tremendous territory for his personal gain, but the short story is that he exploited other countries' desire for free trade, fears about the balance of power, and popular rhetoric about the moral value of imperialism to his advantage.⁴⁴ Leopold's grandiose claims that the Congo Free State would be a grand philanthropic endeavor did not fool the other powers but made good copy in the press.⁴⁵ On the final day of the conference, the attendees "rose and applauded" Leopold and his Association. The Congo Free State had become the symbol of the Civilizing Mission.⁴⁶

Instead, the Congo Free State became infamous for the atrocities committed against the Congolese population during its relatively brief existence. It is important to remember that state-sanctioned violence, forced labor, and social disruption were common features of European colonization in Africa, and the brutality documented in the Congo primarily differed in the scale rather than the form of violence seen elsewhere in colonial Africa. It is telling that of the many people who traveled to the Congo as officials, merchants, and even missionaries, only a few denounced what they saw, and it took more than 10 years for those critiques to be taken seriously. Many accepted Leopold II's defense that "strong authority" and warfare were necessary to bring about the "desirable spread of civilization" and the "work of peace."⁴⁷

As increasingly horrific reports surfaced, however, people began to push for reform. In 1897 and 1900, radical members of the British parliament called for British intervention in the Congo, citing the terms of the Berlin Act and

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Britain's obligations as a signatory. The first such call created no response, and the second only led to the government arguing that the Act did not give Britain grounds to intervene in the Congo Free State.⁴⁸ A year later, however, a Congo reform movement began to take shape in Britain, and in 1903, the British parliament embraced the rhetoric it had once eschewed. Just as the British Foreign Office was sending a consul to investigate matters in the Congo, the House of Commons resolved that the British Government should consult with the other signatories and determine what was to be done about the alleged abuses in the Congo.⁴⁹ The other powers were still reticent, but it is noteworthy that the British Government felt it needed the consent of the other signatories before taking any diplomatic action. The Act had been a multilateral agreement and actions taken to enforce its clauses needed to be as well.

In 1904, the popular reform movement had developed into the Congo Reform Association, and its campaigners also invoked the Berlin Act to justify intervention.⁵⁰ Within a year, the Association was leading the first international humanitarian campaign of the 20th century. The growing public pressure soon forced politicians' hands in the United Kingdom and the United States, which were the epicenters of the movement. Finally, the two governments threatened to reconvene the Berlin Conference if Belgium would not assert control over the Congo Free State and institute reforms (a Belgian take-over was the only viable solution Europeans or Americans could envision at the time; independence for Africans was inconceivable for all but the most radical fringe). The Belgian government was reluctant to assume control over the Congo, but international pressure forced it to purchase the colony, as Leopold would not relinquish it otherwise, at a cost of over 200 million francs.⁵¹

British pressure also forced the new colony to adhere in a small way to the General Act of Berlin's provisions for the supposed uplift of 'native' populations. Historians agree that the reforms were limited. Forced labor and brutal violence, both common practice in colonial Africa, continued under the Belgian regime, and corporations still exploited Congolese resources and people. Due to international pressure, however, Belgium ultimately refused Leopold's demand that profits from the Congo continue to finance institutions and monuments in Belgium. Such projects would continue, but at the expense of

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the principle of humanitarian development was truly indivisible as the Congo Free State was the only colony sanctioned for its use of violence and failure to develop the colony. There were, however, protest movements that secured changes in the labor policies in other colonies.⁵⁴ Those movements did not result in political repercussions as had been the case with the Congo, but the Congo Free State was seen as a very different case in comparison with the violence and force used elsewhere. In *Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad's famous and scathing critique of the hypocrisy and "horror" of the Congo Free State, the main character, Marlow, states in the opening pages how reassuring it is to see British territories marked out on maps "because one knows that some real work is done there."⁵⁵ Even critics of the Congo and other instances of imperial "excess" believed in the overarching benefits of imperialism and saw colonialism, with all its inequalities and violence, as advancing social and political conditions among the colonized.

It was this principle, which had to be upheld in European eyes, and the "diffuse reciprocity" that signatories anticipated to accrue from the agreement that made the Berlin Act into an imperfect but nonetheless multilateral framework for guiding European engagement with Africa prior to World War I. Colonization entailed brutal force and exploitation that did little to develop Africa and much to lock its states into dependent relationships with Western economies. Yet Europeans continued to believe that imperialism brought peace, civilization, and development to their colonies; indeed these liberal societies had to maintain this belief in order to justify their authoritarian rule over much of the world's populations. These beliefs shifted over time, but the underlying principle of imperial altruism continued to resonate. It is telling that at independence, colonial governments saw NGO charities as assuming part of their work in Africa.⁵⁶

This history shows that –far from being oppositional– peacekeeping and imperialism are interconnected and share deep similarities. The means and results

Belgian, not Congolese, taxpayers.⁵² It was a small measure when compared to the resources that flowed out of the Congo, but, in the words of one historian, "It was a substantial triumph of the principle that the Congo should not be exploited for the benefit of Belgium."⁵³

The Congo Reform movement demonstrates that the General Act established at the Berlin West African Conference did have substance. One might still question if

differ in key ways, but more work is needed to tease out both those distinctions and the significant ways in which the imperial past shapes today's interventions. As stated above, these similarities also make imperial scholarship and history relevant to peacekeeping, and the following two sections seek to use that perspective to provoke new questions and qualifications in peacekeeping literature.

Politicizing Identity

In the quest to forge more enduring peace settlements, practitioners and scholars of peacebuilding have embraced recent calls to increase civic participation in peace negotiations. Historically, peace talks, when neither side had surrendered, involved only the leadership of the warring factions and were often conducted in some secrecy, so that the parties could negotiate without worrying about what their supporters would think of their concessions and signs of cooperation with 'the enemy.'⁵⁷ But, such negotiations risk producing settlements that lack popular support. They also generally lead to power-sharing arrangements, in which the opposing leaderships divide "the most lucrative positions in government" between themselves, and do not address the social and political roots of violent struggle,⁵⁸ all of which can send a region back into conflict shortly after the ink dries on the peace agreement.

Preventing a relapse into violence is the point of peacebuilding,⁵⁹ and for more than a decade, there has been a "consensus" that establishing "strong roles for civil society groups in the post-conflict peacebuilding phase" would help create more enduring peace accords.⁶⁰ Proponents argue that greater public participation adds legitimacy and ownership to the peace process, and research has shown that involving civic society representatives increases the probability of achieving a lasting peace.⁶¹ The idea has not been without its critics. Some have argued that expanding participation in peace talks will make it more difficult to reach an agreement, possibly leading to a renewal of fighting, but proponents have countered that there are multiple ways to incorporate more people in the process. Research suggests that even public forums and other ways of gathering popular concerns and ideas without actually bringing more people to the negotiating table will decrease the likelihood of descending back into conflict.⁶²

Imperial history suggests another caveat: that peacebuilders need to be careful and deliberative in *how* they conceive of those civic groups. Identifying people as representatives or voices of particular segments of society can politicize that identity, meaning that what was perhaps before only a social identity becomes a vehicle for making political claims. The politicization of identity can empower people and encourage them to push for beneficial reforms, but it can also lead them to view other groups more antagonistically.⁶³ In such cases, it deepens and solidifies social cleavages. It can even make it difficult to imagine

people from other identity groups as legitimately governing or representing oneself, which was precisely the result when colonial governments ruled with or through representatives.

One of the best examples of this process comes not from Africa but from colonial India. In 1909, the British Parliament yielded to demands for more representative government and passed the Indian Councils Act, better known as the Minto-Morley Reforms. This act enabled a small percent of the population to elect representatives to the colony's legislative councils, but at the behest of Muslim petitioners, the British also reserved seats for Muslim representatives. Clearly, these petitioners were already politicized. They believed that the interests of Muslim Indians could not be represented by Hindus, but the Minto-Morley reforms legitimated this claim and incorporated what was later styled the "Two Nations Theory" into the colony's governance.⁶⁴ It proved to be a profound step. The political gulf between Muslims and Hindus continued to widen, and by Independence, the partition of India into two separate states had become the only viable solution.

A lesser-known impact of the Minto-Morley Reforms was the hope it gave other populations, particularly Dalits, formerly known as Untouchables, that they too could have separate representation. To ward off the further fragmentation of society –and to protect their majority– the Indian National Congress embraced social reforms that improved Dalits' economic and social position, including reserved seats in universities and the civil service. These protections bettered the situation of Dalits, known as Scheduled Castes in political parlance, but they also further politicized caste identity.⁶⁵ Seventy years later, controversy and even occasional violence surround the quota system, which has been extended to a range of castes designated as Other Backward Classes, making the Minto-Morley reforms a cautionary example for those seeking to reform social inequalities through either separate representation or quotas.⁶⁶

No examples in colonial Africa quite match the impact of the reservation system created in India, even though once again the British reserved seats on legislative and advisory councils to ensure that particular population groups –for example, Europeans, Asians, commercial interests, and religious minorities– were specially represented.⁶⁷ These separate electorates politicized identities and stymied the growth of national identities, but whereas the Muslim population in India accounted for almost 25 percent of the population, these special interest groups in Africa often amounted to no more than two or three percent in their respective colonies.⁶⁸ While some of these groups were powerful, the ultimate impact of their politicization was not as great as in India.

The very architecture of colonial rule, however, sharpened and politicized identities at multiple levels of society. These divides could be religious and/or

regional, but the most well-known way in which Europeans created and solidified social divisions was the tribalization of African societies. This was a complex process that could dovetail with precolonial politics, but, generally speaking, colonial governments' desire to categorize and govern their subject populations as cheaply as possible led to new, hybrid systems of rule that increased the political and cultural importance of ethnic identities.

This notion of Africanness and the extent to which one can yet speak of "African" interests can be vital questions for peacekeeping as can the way external countries or organizations engage with African conflicts as part of continent-wide strategies

In many colonies, colonial officials established taxes and enforced some colony-wide laws, but otherwise ruled through indigenous leaders and institutions, turning headmen, chiefs, kings, and emirs into the agents of colonial rule.⁶⁹ This was particularly true in British and Belgian colonies, which embraced what the British called "indirect rule," but financial considerations and the logistics of rule resulted in similar systems in other colonies.⁷⁰ This was not simply a top-down phenomenon, either. Many African people embraced tribal identities since 'their' tribe offered them access to resources and one of the only voices they had in governance.

While imperial proponents of the system argued that it preserved indigenous customs, the indirect rule actually brought numerous changes. It turned more fluid economic, social, and even political boundaries into fixed ethnic divides that were not easily crossed. Chiefs' and kings' power now came partly, and sometimes solely, from the colonial state, and this changed the dynamic between leaders and their subjects, leading to considerable friction. Indigenous leaders who advocated too vociferously or effectively for their subjects' rights were removed from power and replaced with more pliable individuals who might lack any social claim to authority.⁷¹ While indigenous leaders continued to enjoy some social prestige, they became the face of colonialism and were often sidelined politically at independence.

The political-ethnic identities created and/or reified under colonial rule continued to impact post-colonial politics.⁷² In some cases, new bureaucratized systems replaced chiefs as local conduits of political power but remained effectively rooted in the process of distributing power along ethnic lines. Ethnic and regional identities also offered tempting ways for aspiring leaders to build or consolidate a base quickly. Thus, post-colonial choices furthered divides initially created or solidified under colonial administrations and helped set the stage for later conflicts. It is critical, then, that the incorporation of civic groups

in the peacebuilding process does not further exacerbate those same divides or create new ones.

Peacekeepers have been increasingly aware of the need to consider cultural difference and the challenges of doing so without deepening social divides, but neither practitioners nor scholars have fully grappled with the question of how incorporating civic groups might undermine those efforts. For example, one recent study, which concluded that civic participation was beneficial to peacebuilding, started by defining civil society as “the wide range of voluntary organizations in society such as religious associations, women’s organizations, human rights groups, and trade unions.”⁷³ There are profound differences in these types of groups, however. Some organizations, such as the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace, which united Muslim, Christian, urban, and rural women in a common cause, represent a broad cross-section of society, while other organizations, like religious associations, are inherently more exclusionary and may even represent the social divides that helped precipitate conflict.⁷⁴ It is vital to engage these latter groups, but there is a need in the literature to attend to the different types of organizations that are being incorporated into the peace process.

Efforts to incorporate more citizens into peacebuilding hold immense promise, but history suggests that they are not without risk. Giving people a voice through their social affiliations might, like imperial structures, solidify and politicize social divides if not done with due consideration of historical relations and current pressures. People identify themselves in multiple ways, and it can be difficult to parse, let alone predict, how these overlapping political and social identities will interact. However, more research on the long-term political and social impacts of incorporating different types of civic groups into the peace process and of the different ways in which those voices have been solicited and represented should inform peace practices and may lead to more successful outcomes. Empowering people should not come at the cost of increasing their political sense of difference.

Why Africa?

Historical literature also suggests a need to attend more carefully to the question of what is implied by the very phrase “peacekeeping in Africa.” Parties involved in peacekeeping are well aware that each theater of operation in Africa has its own distinct peacekeeping and peacebuilding needs. Aside from the tremendous cultural, linguistic, geographic, and political diversity found in Africa, conflicts everywhere vary in their causes, modes of violence, and political and social implications. Observers are also aware of the need to attend to economic and cultural differences when designing and implementing

peacebuilding measures. There are additional disparities in the integration and effectiveness demonstrated by Africa's regional blocks. The Economic Community of West Africa States (ECOWAS), for instance, has a relatively strong record of coordination and involvement in peacekeeping work, whereas the East African Community acknowledges openly that its peace and security initiatives have been "hampered by the absence of clear strategic direction."⁷⁵ In short, there is no set form for African conflicts, nor are there any interchangeable solutions for resolving them.

Yet, there are innumerable studies and no less than three journals devoted to 'African' conflict and conflict resolution.⁷⁶ The reason most often given for using 'Africa' as the parameter of study is the high proportion of peacekeeping missions on the continent and the money spent financing them. Since 1989, roughly 50 percent of all United Nations peacekeeping missions have addressed conflicts within Africa. Many of these constituted major operations, which mean that African missions have accounted for even higher percentages of peacekeeper deployments and United Nations funding. Additionally, the European Union has contributed approximately €2 billion toward peacekeeping in Africa, while the African Union, NATO, and individual countries have made their own contributions to peacekeeping missions in Africa.⁷⁷

Certainly, peacekeeping operations in Africa warrant analysis, but one must also ask, what coherence or insights are gained by using a geographic unit to categorize peacekeeping missions? Put another way, what, beyond their location on a particular landmass, unifies these conflicts and their corresponding peacekeeping missions? The editors of one collection found that

Taken together, the contributions in this volume show that there is no consensus about the role, aims and effects of continental and international peacebuilding programs and initiatives in Africa. The contributors highlight that... [peacebuilding] practices play out differently in different locales. Peacebuilding ideas and initiatives are at various times reinforced, questioned, subverted, or reappropriated and redesigned by different African actors.⁷⁸

The articles in that volume were individually and collectively informative. There were themes and lessons that could be drawn from them, making the finding that there was nothing unifying peacekeeping efforts in Africa especially noteworthy. It is time to rethink the tendency to address conflicts and peacebuilding efforts on the continent as though they form a unit.



Imperial rule has cast long shadows, and current interventions in Africa cannot escape the impact of those legacies without directly engaging with them

It is hoped that this exercise and the caveats raised about politicizing identity and using Africa as a parameter of study will prompt more historically engaged critiques of peacebuilding and help practitioners and scholars alike begin to grapple with the ‘underlying dynamics’ that continue to shape international interventions in Africa

A very different reason a few have given for focusing on African peacekeeping operations is that the continent has served as a “peacekeeping laboratory.”⁷⁹ Several conflicts in Africa have challenged the initial mold of peacekeeping, and their resolution has led to new methods and new understandings of the amorphous ‘rules’ of peacekeeping.⁸⁰ Here too, one finds a parallel to imperialism, when African colonies served as laboratories for a number of European developments and initiatives.⁸¹ To an extent, this history may predispose external parties to be more willing to experiment in Africa, but the large number of operations in Africa also makes it probable that the narrowly conceived tenets of peacekeeping would be tested

on that continent. Yet a thematic approach that brings together innovations and changes in peacekeeping, wherever they have occurred, offers a more effective way to assess changes in peacekeeping, which still leaves the question: what is gained and what is lost by addressing peacekeeping ‘in Africa?’

The need to ask such questions is all the more pressing when dealing with a place like Africa, the very name of which is invested with deep cultural meanings and signifiers. As noted above, claims about the violence and backwardness of Africa became the justifications for European conquest, and while terms like “the Dark Continent” and “savage Africa” have become passé, the underlying ideas linger on in the form of disaster narratives and paternalistic efforts to ‘save Africa.’⁸² The very phrase ‘peacekeeping in Africa’ feeds such ideas by implying that the continent as a whole is conflict-ridden, and, on a very different level, discourages readers and practitioners from thinking about those conflicts and peacebuilding operations in terms of the global exchanges that are so critical for understanding them. It thus runs the double risk of reinforcing stereotypes of Africa and obscuring similarities and lessons from peacekeeping in other regions.

To be sure, ideas shape reality and, among other impacts, imperial notions of African difference catalyzed the development of a pan-African identity. During decolonization, a few leaders even called for the dissolution of colonial borders and the creation of a United States of Africa. That idea never gained widespread support, but those visions helped inspire the Organization of African Unity, and by extension the African Union, which continues to promote coordination and

integration across the continent. Competing interests and fiscal demands have often hamstrung such efforts, but the goal of achieving economic independence from external bodies and finding African solutions for African problems continues to resonate on the continent and beyond.⁸³ This *notion* of Africanness and the extent to which one can yet speak of “African” interests can be vital questions for peacekeeping as can the way external countries or organizations engage with African conflicts as part of continent-wide strategies.

It does not follow, however, that Africa, as a place, will necessarily provide a useful category of analysis when looking at peacekeeping operations, and using geographic boundaries to narrow a study to more manageable terms carries certain risks. If the questions posed do not call for a specific focus on Africa, limiting the case studies to those on the continent will prevent useful comparisons to operations in other locales. More problematically, imperial legacies have so shaped Western –and indeed global– ideas about Africa, that studying peacekeeping ‘in Africa’ can reify old stereotypes and imply a unity that is not there.

For instance, one issue many peacekeepers have grappled with is why African governments have not taken greater ownership over peacekeeping in Africa.⁸⁴ Few, however, address why African countries *should* be equally or more invested than the major world powers in peacebuilding efforts on the continent, particularly when there are so many other critical demands on their budgets. Are conflicts in Africa necessarily African problems for which African solutions should be sought? Certainly, research supports the involvement of regional actors, but that engagement does not have to be financial. When thinking of ownership over the process, does it make more sense to think in terms of political and economic geographies rather than cartographic ones?

The very word ‘Africa’ has become so embedded with notions of difference and deviance from Western norms, that even pausing and asking such questions can be a small but important step toward unraveling the imperial legacies and influences on international, and especially Western, engagements with Africa. There is a need for studies on peacekeeping in Africa, but equally there is a need to consider why we are speaking about a continent, and asking what the ramifications of doing so are. Otherwise, the phrase ‘peacekeeping in Africa’ will circumscribe the questions, analyses, and solutions offered in peacekeeping, as well as interactions on the ground.

Conclusion

The disfavor that now surrounds the notion of imperialism makes any comparison between colonial occupation and peacekeeping sound like an indictment of the latter, but that is far from the aim or import of this article. The

imperial rule has cast long shadows, and current interventions in Africa cannot escape the impact of those legacies without directly engaging with them. Mozambique, for example, has long been viewed as a successful peacebuilding intervention, but while researching that process Meera Sabaratnam was surprised to find programs marred by tremendous disjuncture. She concluded that peacebuilding practices cannot be improved with “more cultural appropriateness, more hybridity, more participatory planning mechanisms and so on.” Change can only happen, she argued, when actors confront the “underlying dynamic” and its roots in imperial power relations.⁸⁵

That is not possible, though, so long as the differences between imperialism and peacebuilding are drawn so starkly that the former becomes a simple foil for the latter. Responding productively to critiques like Sabaratnam’s requires reconsidering the similarities as well as the differences between imperialism and peacekeeping, and the ways that imperial legacies continue to shape interventions today. This article has offered a first step in that process by reframing imperialism in terms of two overriding concepts of peacekeeping, multilateralism and humanitarianism. It is hoped that this exercise and the caveats raised about politicizing identity and using Africa as a parameter of study will prompt more historically engaged critiques of peacebuilding and help practitioners and scholars alike begin to grapple with the ‘underlying dynamics’ that continue to shape international interventions in Africa. ■

Endnotes

1. These figures differ from those given by the UN, because the UN classifies both the First and Second UN Emergency Force missions, which addressed the Suez Canal Crisis (1956–1957) and 1973 Arab-Israeli (or Yom Kippur) War, respectively, as Middle Eastern missions. As the Suez Canal Crisis precipitated the decolonization of Africa, it is counted here as an African mission along with the UN Operation in the Congo (1960–1964). The 1973 Arab-Israeli War, by contrast, is better understood in terms of Middle Eastern relations and politics.

2. The United Nations provides the final expenditure for most of its past missions. The total for 22 of the 30 missions in Africa is over \$33 billion. This does not, however, include the 13-year long mission in Côte d'Ivoire (UNOCI) or the budgets of any current missions, the collective 2018 budget for which totaled more than \$3.5 billion. Figures derived from factsheets provided at “Where We Operate,” *United Nations Peacekeeping*, retrieved October 5, 2018, from <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/where-we-operate>; “Past Peacekeeping Operations,” *United Nations Peacekeeping*, retrieved October 5, 2018, from <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/past-peacekeeping-operations>.

3. Kenneth Omeje, “The Political Economy of Peacebuilding in Africa,” in Tony Karbo and Kudrat Virk (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Peacebuilding in Africa*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 293.

4. Norrie Macqueen, *United Nations Peacekeeping in Africa Since 1960*, (London: Routledge, 2014).

5. As the UN classifies both of the Emergency Force operations as Middle Eastern, it gives the total as eight missions between 1948 and 1988, and three since. See, endnote number one.

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8. See, Macqueen, *United Nations Peacekeeping*.
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19. Cunliffe, "Still the Spectre," p. 432.
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21. Ruggie, "Multilateralism: The Anatomy of an Institution," p. 571.
22. Ruggie, "Multilateralism: The Anatomy of an Institution," p. 571.
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