5-19-2000

Neutrality, Peacekeeping, and Globalization: Problems for the United Nations in Africa

Editor

Recommended Citation

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Title: Neutrality, Peacekeeping, and Globalization: Problems for the United Nations in Africa
Author: Editor
Volume: 8
Issue: 17
Date: 2000-05-19
Keywords: Africa, Neutrality, Peacekeeping, United Nations

Abstract. This article describes problems facing the United Nations as it seeks to effect its global mandate to foster peace, resolve conflict, and otherwise contribute to human welfare.

The appalling stories from Sierra Leone continue. Kidnappings of United Nations (UN) personnel, difficulties in finding the kidnapped, murdering of UN personnel, the very introduction of inadequately armed and numbered UN personnel to function as peacekeepers, the siding of UN authorities with local leaders who themselves have engaged in atrocities and other human rights violations--these and more point to problems facing the UN in effecting its global mandate to foster peace, resolve conflict, and other wise contribute to human welfare. Ironically, the very era of globalization in which political experts state we live may be a big contributor to these problems.

One problem concerns the nature of neutrality. The UN most often claims neutrality between and among people and instead claims partiality only to ideals. Unfortunately, this claim of neutrality becomes itself a paean to an ideal and does not correspond to "facts on the ground." Any action or nonaction will be taken by sides to a conflict as partiality for and against themselves and others. Thus, the UN is setting itself up for certain failure by making a claim that it cannot possibly keep because it is not in control of what it claims it says it is able to do.

Another problem concerns the nature of peacekeeping. The UN often intimates in its many deliberations that peacemaking takes more in the way of personnel, equipment, and money than peacekeeping. The former is viewed as necessitating significant armed force and significant rationale to deploy and employ significant armed force so that war becomes peace. On the other hand, peacekeeping is viewed as necessitating much less force and rationale because peace has already broken out--or at least the sides to a conflict have already agreed to peace. However, peace can be a segue to war, a deception, or otherwise some sort of disagreement--all three possibilities changing with the speed of quicksilver. The logistics of changing from light to heavy force on the other hand is a much more cumbersome process. And to further complicate the situation, there may well be times when light force is a more effective component of peacemaking and heavy force may be more effective even when peace has already broken out.

A third problem is that concerns with neutrality and peacekeeping precede today's era of globalization but may be exacerbated by this era. This is because globalization comprises increased (1) speed of available information; (2) depth and breadth of available information; and (3) unpredictability in the dimensions of sensitization and habituation effects concerning (a) cooperation, (b) competition, (c) peace, and (d) violence imbued in available information. All of this seems to ensure that neat semantic distinctions may tragically fail in the socioperceptual chaos of virtual and real worlds.

The UN's problems in Sierra Leone were foreshadowed by failed humanitarian and peacekeeping efforts in Angola, Somalia, and Rwanda. They are being paralleled in important respects in the Congo. Have we reached the point--as we have with other utopias an d ideals--of jettisoning neutrality and peacekeeping as viable multilateral goals? (See Bobrow, D. B., & Boyer, M. A. (1997). Maintaining system stability:

1

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

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2