The UN and intra-state conflicts: problematising the normative connection

Widespread intra-state conflict is not a new phenomenon. Its rise to the centre of attention in international policy circles is. UN involvement in intra-state conflicts is not new either. What is new is the increasing systematisation of UN involvement in conflict-torn societies. It is these two novelties of the post-Cold War world that shape the main concerns of this study. What is problematised here is the connection between the UN’s evolving approach to intra-state conflicts and the value system of the international community.

There should be little doubt that the UN’s frequent involvement in domestic conflicts contributes to gradual change in several international norms. As is the case with any systematised practice, the UN’s intra-state peacekeeping is certainly capable of creating, modifying, and eroding established international norms to varying degrees. The more interesting connection, however, lies in the question of whether the UN’s intra-state peacekeeping (quite apart from being either a ‘cause’ or ‘consequence’) mirrors a deep-running and more profound normative change in world politics, which is probably the manifestation of much bigger influences exerted on international actors and which has considerable impact on how violent conflicts are perceived, contextualised and addressed. Has the UN’s relationship with intra-state conflicts always reflected, and rested on, the same configuration or interpretation of significant international norms? If not, what has changed in the way the international community links the UN with intra-state conflicts, and how? Equally importantly, does the suspected change hint at the possibly evolving normative significance of the UN in world politics?

This study takes issue with the relatively reductionist explanations of what the UN is and how it relates to peace and security. The post-Cold War systematisation of UN involvement in intra-state conflicts, similar to any other UN activity, has been variously attributed (implicitly or explicitly) to a number of factors, including, among others, the particular geopolitical
change that the end of the Cold War brought about; the usual pragmatism of the international community in the absence of a more suitable mechanism for dealing with destabilising effects of domestic conflicts; the distinct organisational relevance, culture and experience of the UN; and the UN’s own efforts to assume a special identity and role in world politics. A closer examination of the evolution of UN peacekeeping in intra-state conflicts – especially between the two most active and critical periods of UN peacekeeping: the early 1960s and the early 1990s – suggests that the role assigned to the UN in intra-state conflict management begs more than the explanations offered so far. It suggests in the first place that the UN’s evolving approach to conflict involves a number of normative changes in addition to the several empirical changes which have been the subject of much scholarly research in the post-Cold War period. More importantly, it suggests that this evolving approach indicates a deeper and gradual, though highly obscured, normative shift that gives the UN a new institutional meaning, a new raison d’être.

Although the UN is at the centre of much empirical and normative research, its possibly evolving relationship to the wider international value system remains largely under-explored. More notably, despite the radical changes in the global political setting and in the UN’s scope of activities over the years, what exactly the UN stands for is not all that clear. We do know that the UN has a vast mandate and is based on a great many principles. Yet we do not quite know – apart from our ‘first impressions’ – whether, and to what extent, international actors prioritise any of the UN’s objectives and principles over others, and whether there has been a change in their priorities, possibly impacting on the UN’s evolving identity.

It has long been argued that many potential contradictions are inherent in the UN Charter – for instance, that between peace and justice.1 Perhaps more immediately noticeable are the perceived tensions between what might be labelled ‘state-centric’2 and ‘human-centric’3 principles embedded in the Charter.4 Roberts and Kingsbury observe that the principles of territorial integrity and self-determination may prove irreconcilable, as was demonstrated in the case of the former Yugoslavia.5 At times, the principles of non-intervention and human rights may come into conflict.6 The ongoing debate on the right to humanitarian intervention, for instance, revolves mainly around a perceived normative dilemma embedded in the Charter. As the Carnegie Commission puts it: ‘The contradiction between respecting national sovereignty and the moral and ethical imperative to stop slaughter within states is real and difficult to resolve.’7 Examples of such normative difficulties can be multiplied. The principle of peaceful settlement of conflicts, for instance, may be at odds with human rights and self-determination.8 It is possible to argue that even peace and security may sometimes contradict each other.9
To complicate matters, there are common and enduring ‘beliefs’ about the UN, the accuracy of which must be questioned in the light of contemporary developments. A classical example is the idea that the UN is ‘of, by, and for governments’. Another example, which is closely connected and perhaps more vital, is the view that the UN’s primary objective is maintenance of international peace and security. No doubt, these beliefs find some support from the wording of the Charter. However, does the UN’s actual practice not raise serious doubts about their correctness? The organisation’s active involvement in intra-state conflicts is a case in point. It may well be the case that international players are redefining the UN’s ‘normative basis’, that is its ideal(ised) objectives, functions and authority – all three of which are key analytical concepts utilised in this study – without touching the wording of the Charter. In the process, the impact of some crucial Charter principles, among them state sovereignty, human rights, and socio-economic development, may be changing.

Still more significant are the wider implications of such possible change for ‘governance’ and for the UN’s role in it. Originally the UN was devised by victorious states to regulate ‘inter-national’ behaviour following World War II. In that sense, the organisation was intended to play a regulatory role in inter-governmental governance, with a special emphasis on peace and security. The Charter embodies states’ scepticism as to potential UN intrusion into governance within their internal sphere. Perhaps the best indicator of such scepticism is the principle of UN non-intervention, which finds its expression in Article 2.7. It may well be the case, though, that the UN is increasingly allowed, encouraged and indeed expected to play an active role in governance within what has been hitherto considered the exclusive political domain of states. The changes that have taken place over time in the UN’s actual practice vis-à-vis intra-state conflicts are certainly significant enough to provoke interest in whether these are indicative of a corresponding normative shift, involving the UN’s overall role in world politics.

Addressing normativity

What the UN is and is not, what it does and does not do, are at some level deeply connected with the international community’s collective expectations of and prescriptions for the UN. The world organisation’s involvement in intra-state conflicts, as epitomised by its intra-state peacekeeping activities, cannot be adequately understood if treated in isolation from the normative domain. It is for this reason that this study persistently addresses the issue of normativity; and it is in this sense that the study engages in ‘normative research’. This conscious choice needs a brief elaboration.

Normativity, with its multiple meanings and implications, has already
become a central concern in the study of international relations. The terms ‘norm’ and ‘normative’ suffer, of course, from non-consensual usage by social scientists. The distinctions to be drawn between norm/normative and such related concepts as value/value judgement, morality/moral, ethics/ethical, are, to say the least, blurred in the literature. Definitional usage generally seems to lack a clear conceptualisation. This is perhaps the first difficulty which besets any exploration of the normative domain. The difficulty is compounded by the fact that ‘norm’ and ‘normative’ are also frequently used in combination with related terms, some of which have already been mentioned. We find, for example, such expressions as ‘normative rules’, ‘ethical norms’, and ‘normative principles’. Despite their solid place and frequent application in social scientific discourse, norm and normative seem to be used in academic writings with much the same flexible, broad and multiple connotations we encounter in everyday language.15

Apart from the absence of consensual definition and conceptualisation, there is also the added difficulty posed by the expression ‘normative research/theory’. This difficulty does not necessarily arise from the definition or meaning of norm and normative. Normative theory seems to refer to three distinct types of intellectual activity, which are not, however, always or entirely mutually exclusive. The first type involves notions of what should be done. We may consider this to be the classical concern of normative theory, which is usually associated with normative ethics, that is the traditional subdiscipline of moral philosophy, which aims to guide actions.16 Here the act of normative theorising is equated with thinking systematically about what is good and what is bad, what is right and what is wrong. Consequently the theorist arrives at, or at least hopes to arrive at, a set of standards which could and should be applied to distinguish between that which is right/good and that which is wrong/bad.17 It is this classical understanding of normative theory which presents itself as the opposite of ‘empirical’ theory. Normative theorising in this sense deals with the ‘ideal’, whereas empirical theorising is interested in the ‘real’.18 While the use of the term classical or traditional in social science may implicitly suggest that the approach has somehow been transcended or undermined,19 the classical understanding of normative theory is not necessarily outmoded. Many contemporary works still have substantial elements which owe much to this classical understanding – though they may adopt, for example, a postmodernist stance.20

The second type involves enquiry into norms which either already exist or are in the making. According to this understanding, the task of normative theory is to discover, describe and explain empirically the communal21 standards and perceptions as to right and wrong. The task is, further, to explain the relationship between norms and other phenomena. How discovery, description and explanation of norms (as in the case of other ‘facts’ or
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‘phenomena’) can best proceed is a different and ongoing debate between differing epistemological and methodological approaches to science. This second understanding of normative theory has no doubt some affinity with the positivist school of thought. Put differently, if a positivist were interested in norms and claimed to be conducting normative research, it is this second understanding of normative theory that he would have in mind. A multitude of such studies are to be found in the contemporary literature.22

The last type of intellectual activity designated by ‘normative theory’ pertains to the very nature of the act of theorising and research. In recent years many scholars have prefaced their studies by explicitly admitting the impossibility of non-normative theorising, even though their preference might be to remain in one or other of the two traditions outlined above.23 Accordingly, the normativity of a theory does not stem merely from the intention (as in the first understanding) or object (as in the second understanding) of analysis, but also from the inescapable fact that the very act of theorising/research itself involves normative approaches, reflections and judgements. The theorists as well as the communities around which the act of theorising takes place are not immune to norms and normative influences. Research activity (including observation of facts, perception of ‘reality’, general reasoning, mental processing of data, and even the formulation of descriptive statements) is itself largely shaped by the normative influences to which the researcher is subject.24 Therefore, explicit normative theory25 is that in which the theorist problematises the normative nature of any theorising and seeks to offer a methodology capable of overcoming this difficulty.26

The ontological and epistemological tensions between the second and third approaches to normativity are apparent. Is there such an ‘objective’ reality as a norm? If norms exist only ‘intersubjectively’ – that is to say, not independently of one’s mind – how can one adopt an epistemological position that is almost positivist in orientation?27 Proponents of both approaches are today very much aware of the criticisms levelled against their stance.28 The issue is far from resolved.

This study is concerned to explore the ‘normative’ domain. The normative dimension of the study addresses neither its purpose nor its nature. Rather, it addresses the object of analysis, namely the development and impact of norms in the international realm. The crucial point here is that we are examining international actors’ value preferences (crudely put: the object) in a conceptual framework that we ourselves have drawn in accordance with our own research interests and approach to reality (our perception of object). This study, then, adopts the second approach outlined above – without necessarily embracing the positivist stance with all its wider ontological implications – and at the same time situates itself consciously in the third approach.29

In analytical terms, we are concerned to identify the perceptions and
normative preferences of relevant players as to what should be the UN’s objectives, functions and authority vis-à-vis intra-state conflicts. The word ‘should’ points to the expectations that key players have of the UN, and in that sense expresses the ideals of the UN. Discussions at the UN usually involve two types of ‘should’. While the first type relates to ideals, regardless of practical constraints, the second type takes into account a range of practical constraints. It should be apparent that the two are not always or easily separable. Nevertheless, the study tries to distinguish between the two types as carefully as possible, and to focus on the former rather than the latter.

Norms, interests, time and governance

International norms, peacekeeping, intra-state conflicts, and the UN have each been the subject of a great number of studies. A brief examination of the literature that combines these broad areas of research points to a growing interest in human rights, humanitarianism and the erosion of the sovereignty principle, especially during the 1990s. Much research has been done on whether an international norm of humanitarian intervention is emerging under the UN’s auspices. Change in international norms, in this sense, has been central to post-Cold War studies, though its wider implications for the UN and for the international value system have not been adequately explored. Perhaps as a consequence, the analysis of the dynamics underlying the triangular relationship between the UN, intra-state conflicts and relevant actors’ conceptions of governance is largely absent in the literature. Two crucial factors are at play here: the nexus between interests and normative preferences, and the time dimension.

The role that is envisaged for the UN in governance can be usefully considered a function of the complex interplay between interests and norms. It is especially in this respect that this study hopes to make an advance on our understanding of the UN’s evolution. It problematises relevant actors’ expectations of and prescriptions for the UN in relation to intra-state conflicts. More specifically it seeks to establish how these actors interpret or at least relate to those few crucial norms that may be said to constitute the backbone of the UN’s legal/normative texture. More explicitly still, the study contextualises actors’ value preferences in relation to significant Charter principles, as reflected in both rhetoric and practice, and as they emerge in the context of the structural political change over time. In other words, throughout the study particular attention is devoted to the identification of the interests and normative preferences of relevant actors that have constituted complex, hardly separable, wholes in the specified time periods. The way such interest-norm complexes have impacted on the UN’s normative approach to intra-state conflicts specifically, and on the organisation’s possibly evolving
role in global governance generally, will shed light on the dynamics and patterns of change.

Another feature of this study is its sensitivity to a factor that is crucial to understanding any social institution – namely time. International relations as a field of enquiry has for too long underestimated the centrality and implications of the time dimension. On the one hand, the discipline has been full of ahistorical accounts. On the other hand, it has suffered from what might be called a ‘vulgar mode’ of historicism. This study ranges over a timespan that is relatively short in the lifetime of any institution (i.e. not more than three decades), and attempts to identify the continuities and discontinuities between two sets of interest-norm complexes in the international realm, one corresponding to the early 1960s, the other to the early 1990s. If profound normative changes have indeed occurred in such a relatively short period, a careful account of the political and structural dynamics at work may shed useful light on the recent past and point to instructive implications for the future.

The UN’s activities in the Congo or its ‘transitional authority’ in West Irian were radical moves once. Some three decades later came the Namibia operation, which would have been unimaginable even a few years earlier. El Salvador, Cambodia, and Bosnia, to cite but a few, were each more ‘daring’ than the missions that came before. Yet the extent and modalities of UN involvement in intra-state conflicts, and ultimately governance, have proved ever more remarkable. What exactly was the UN trying to do in Kosovo or East Timor in the late 1990s? Is the UN’s concern in those and similar places exclusively over international peace and security? More to the point, the dynamic that facilitates and limits this apparent change in the scope of UN activity is not amenable to easy description, let alone explanation. International norms and accompanying interests may well be giving rise to evolving modes of governance. The contemporary world may be in the process of creating new forms of governance, in which the UN is only one, though uniquely placed, actor.

The UN’s intra-state peacekeeping serves our research purposes as a useful and powerful symbol for overall UN involvement in intra-state conflicts. Our focus is on those intra-state conflicts where the UN’s objectives, functions and authority were partially if not wholly embodied in and delegated to UN peacekeeping operations. The normative views expressed or implied by different actors on the eve and in the wake of UN peacekeeping form the focal point of our enquiry. Setting up a peacekeeping operation frequently attracts normative judgements on UN peacekeeping per se. To the extent possible, we need to distinguish between attitudes to the UN in general and attitudes to UN peacekeeping in particular. Consequently, this study takes into account actors’ views on what the objectives, functions and authority of UN peacekeeping
should be in the context of intra-state conflicts, and attempts to discern the implications of these expectations for the role ascribed to the UN and for the broader normative context within which that role is (re)defined.

Two points that arise out of the preceding introduction need to be clearly underlined. First, while dealing with intra-state peacekeeping, this study puts the emphasis more on ‘intra-state’ than on ‘peacekeeping’, because what begs the explanations we are seeking is the UN’s systematised active involvement in intra-state conflicts rather than the tools used for that purpose. Secondly, the emphasis of the study will be on the peacekeeping environments in which field operations take shape, and not on field operations per se. ‘Peacekeeping environments’, as understood here, encompass as much the global political setting as the specific conditions prevailing on the ground. Peacekeeping environment refers not only to the geographical or territorial space in which UN and non-UN field operations are conducted, but also to the political space within which normative views are expressed. It refers to the larger milieu within which international actors present, exchange and negotiate their overall value preferences and their views on the UN’s relationship to these value preferences. The study is interested, then, in characterising the normative preferences that UN peacekeeping environments reveal, and the UN’s prescribed role in relation to this normative framework.

Roland Paris has correctly identified a prevailing problem in the peacekeeping literature: ‘the study of peace operations has generated a great deal of microtheory but very little macrotheory’. If we are to make sense of the ‘very existence’ of UN peace operations, and of its relevance to governance, there is a need to marry the peacekeeping research with the more theoretical body of literature. Though ours is not primarily a study of international relations theory, it draws on theoretical insights, and hopes to contribute to the bridging of the gap between formal theory and its applicability to empirical research. Making use of the conceptual tools provided by the ‘historical structural’ approach, as will be introduced in Chapter 2, we set out to gain a better understanding of the UN’s organisational role in world politics. We place particular emphasis on global structural changes and their impact on collective expectations of the UN as an actor (and ultimately as an institution).

Chapter 2 not only clarifies our theoretical position, but also elaborates on the key concepts used in the study and develops the overall analytical framework. Chapter 3 establishes, then, the historical structural context within which the UN’s response to intra-state conflicts took shape. The purpose of this scene-setting chapter is to convey something of the enormous complexity of the political conditions within which violent conflict, and the UN’s response to it, emerge. Without adequate visualisation of the structural landscape, the normative discussion on which we are about to embark would lose much of its explanatory utility. Against this backdrop, Chapter 4 deals specifically with
the range of cases where the UN was actively involved in intra-state conflicts to the point of conducting a peacekeeping operation. Here UN peacekeeping in intra-state conflicts is situated within the broader political context. Attention is focused on the normative basis of such UN involvement, and on its relationship with the political changes discussed in the historical structural context chapter.

In the subsequent four chapters we further develop the argument by concentrating on four comprehensive case studies: the Congo, Cyprus, Angola and Cambodia. We explore the interest-norm complexes within which those cases were handled by the UN. The aim is to demonstrate in detail how relevant actors' normative preferences, which were closely entwined with their political calculations in the wake of existing structural configurations, were resolved in specific peacekeeping environments where the UN was especially active in addressing intra-state conflicts.

NOTES


2 Perhaps the major state-centric norm is state sovereignty, which is closely connected with the principles of territorial integrity, political independence, non-intervention and self-help. Stedman considers the last two as the ‘fundamental rules of sovereignty’: see S. J. Stedman, International Actors and Internal Conflicts (New York: Rockefeller Brothers Fund, 1999), p. 21.

3 Knight notes that the principles of state sovereignty and non-intervention are embodied in Articles 2(4) and 2(7), while the principles of human rights protection and humanitarian intervention are incorporated to the preamble, Articles 1(3), 13, 55, 56, 62, 68, and 76(c): see W. A. Knight, ‘The changing human rights regime, state sovereignty, and Article 2(7) in the post-Cold War era’, in A. Williams et al., Article 2(7) Revisited, available online at www.brown.edu/Departments/ACUNS/New_publications/2.7/2.7.TOC.shtml (16 December 2000).


9 For some actors, requirements of peace and requirements of security may not be the same. One needs only to recall the famous motto of the former Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu: ‘peace with security’.


12 ‘Human rights’, as understood here, are inseparable from ‘humanitarianism’. The technical (and, admittedly, often practical) distinction between the ‘human rights law’ and ‘humanitarian law’ is not relevant to our problematisation. In any case, the two bodies of law are converging at an increasing pace.


14 Article 2.7. specifically relates to the UN’s non-intervention in states’ internal affairs: ‘Nothing contained in the present Charter shall authorize the United Nations to intervene in matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state or shall require the Members to submit such matters to settlement under the present Charter: but this principle shall not prejudice the application of enforcement measures under Chapter VII.’

15 While adherence to everyday connotations poses an ‘analytical’ difficulty, this is not necessarily or always detrimental to academic endeavour. ‘Understanding’ (*Verstehen*) and tackling the issue of normativity may not be possible without adopting the common social/communal expressions of it. Our notions of norm and normativity in this study will be clarified in Chapter 2. Suffice it to say at this stage that we do not find it useful to introduce artificial distinctions between three terms which are used in this study more or less synonymously: ‘norm’, ‘principle’ and ‘value’. Nevertheless, with reference to Milton Rokeach’s classical definition of value as ‘an enduring belief that a specific mode of conduct or end-state of existence is personally or socially preferable to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence’ (M. Rokeach, *The Nature of Human Values*, New York: The Free Press, 1973, p. 5), we need to note that our usage of ‘norm’ and ‘principle’ tends to point to *behavioural prescriptions* involving ‘specific modes of conduct’. ‘Value’, on the other hand, relates more to preferred ‘end-states of existence’, the verbal expressions of which need not involve proper ‘ought to’ sentences. To give an example, the expression ‘state sovereignty’ would perhaps qualify more as a value, whereas ‘State sovereignty should be protected’ would indicate a corresponding norm/principle.


19 Well-known examples in international relations are ‘classical’ realism and liberalism as opposed to neo-realism and neo-liberalism.


21 The community in question may be the ‘international community’ as well.

22 It would not be incorrect to argue that a major part of contemporary normative research in international relations, ranging from the 1980s regime theories to the latest constructivist programme, is based on this conception. This approach is both exemplified and quickly surveyed in M. Finnemore and K. Sikkink, ‘International norm dynamics and political change’, in P. J. Katzenstein, R. O. Keohane and S. D. Krasner (eds), *Exploration and Contestation in the Study of World Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), pp. 247–77. While the burgeoning norm-sensitive constructivist research agenda in international relations theory increasingly draws on interpretivist insights, there are notable arguments that it is in fact based on a positivist epistemology: see D. Dessler, ‘Constructivism within a positivist social science’, *Review of International Studies*, 25 (1999), 123–37.


25 Since this third understanding excludes the possibility of non-normative theory, the most proper distinction in this understanding could perhaps be only between ‘explicit’ and ‘implicit’ normative theories, where the latter refers to theories which are either not aware of their own normative nature or do not deal with the problem of normativity.

26 Depending on one’s normative approach, of course, this may be perceived and presented as a ‘richness in our understanding of the world’, for example, rather than a ‘difficulty to overcome’.


As such, this study has a degree of affinity to 'critical approaches'.

These are perhaps better captured in 'ought to' formulations.

Boutros-Ghali’s following statement is a very good example encapsulating both types of 'should': ‘I am firmly committed to the concept of peace enforcement. It is essential if we are to strengthen international peace and security. But there is a new reality: member states are not ready for it. I must accept reality. I also must continue to give you my view’; cited in J. N. Rosenau and M. Durfee, Thinking Theory Thoroughly: Coherent Approaches to An Incoherent World (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), p. 117.


This interplay attracts systematic attention at a growing rate from a group of international relations scholars ('constructivists') who put greater emphasis on the role played by norms. A representative volume is P. J. Katzenstein (ed.), The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

In his discussion of human rights, Ruggie points to the importance of interests and context: ‘Human rights are more than a mere rationalization of structures of power. Yet their international normative status remains closely dependent upon the projection of power, the defense of interests, and the nature of political community existing among states.’: see J. G. Ruggie, ‘Human rights and the future international community’, Daedalus, 12:4 (Fall 1983), 99–100.

This is not an analytical category that we propose to use in this study, but a phrase that usefully designates the nexus in question.

There are relatively few analytical studies which 'problematisce' change in the context of the UN. Those which attempt to discern the dynamics of and realistic possibilities for change are even rarer. Notable examples include M. Bertrand, 'The process of change in an interdependent world and possible institutional consequences', in J. P. Renninger (ed.), The Future Role of the United Nations in an Interdependent World (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1989), pp. 39–70; W. A. Knight, A Changing United Nations: Multilateral Evolution and the Quest for Global Governance (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2000); Roberts and Kingsbury, Presiding Over a Divided World.

Perhaps the classical example is the ahistorical analytical stance taken by the neoreal-ist school.
‘Historicism’, as popularised and criticised by Popper, refers to the deterministic idea that there must be fixed laws of historical progress: see K. R. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, 2nd edn. (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1960). The ‘modernisation school’ of the 1950s and 1960s is a good example for this tendency in political theory.