

Russia's Challenge to Liberal Peacekeeping

Written by Daria Blinova

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DARIA BLINOVA, JAN 23 2023

According to the United Nations, "peacekeeping helps countries torn by conflict create the conditions for lasting peace". Peacebuilding, being a part of peacekeeping activity, is the process of transformation from a state of war to a state of peace (Lederach 1997) with the aim to accomplish a democratic transition. It provides stability for international security and recognizes that conflicting parties may transcend their mutually hostile intentions for the sake of stability and development which are fundamental components of people's prosperity. After the Cold War, the system transitioned to a world dominated by the U.S. as the main guarantor of liberal values. International institutions such as NATO, OSCE, UN, and others embraced a liberal peacebuilding model that is directed not only at simply reconciliation between conflicting sides but at the promotion of democracy through the imposition of market-based economic reforms, incorporation of the rule of law traditions, and building of administrative capacity through the design of state institutions.

However, liberal peacebuilding has been challenged and questioned for its appropriateness to countries experienced political disruption and social unrest. The top-down approach, that the UN took as the basis for the peacemaking process, raised concerns among the local population who often criticized liberal peacebuilding for the negligence of inclusivity and lack of context-sensitivity (Newman, Paris, and Richmond 2009, 4). Nevertheless, the beliefs in the universality and effectiveness of the liberal peacebuilding approach have been preserved over the last decades.

Russia's perspective on peacekeeping has been always dissimilar. It is substantially different from Western views. While the United States and European countries see peacekeeping as a possibility of protecting human rights and freedoms with the ultimate goal of displacing authoritarian regimes and promoting liberal ideals, the Russian approach, oppositely, assumes the maintenance of the local structure and keeping current regimes in power for the sake of stability. These two perspectives oppose each other, echo the Cold War period of competition for ideological influence, and display an ongoing implicit resistance between the two sides even now.

Against the background of constructive criticism of the liberal peacebuilding process (Paris 2004; Richmond 2014) and failures to maintain international missions as well as prevent the reoccurrence of conflicts (Diehl, Reifschneider, and Hensel 1996), since the end of the Cold War Russia took a moment to promote its own vision of how peace should be built. Since 1991 leaders of the country have rejected the understanding of the liberal paradigm and perceived it as the new form of imperialism practiced by Western countries. However, the Russian way of conducting peacekeeping operations, in turn, has been criticized by the West and similarly perceived as expansionism directed at protecting Russia's authoritarian allies regionally and internationally.

Striving to "manage" the conflicts in its near abroad in post-Soviet space, Russia placed countries that formerly belonged to the Soviet bloc into the dominant-subordinate position and strived to solve their domestic disorders that were created by the break-up of the USSR. Since the collapse of the USSR, several armed conflicts occurred between former Soviet republics that required bringing external mediators. For example, the fight between Armenia and Azerbaijan for the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh province and adjacent seven regions of Azerbaijan remained to be unsolved since 1988. Intermittent incidents between the two countries, despite occasional ceasefires, have continued and led to a protracted conflict that pose the danger in the region even today.

Similarly, the interethnic escalation within Georgia in the 1990s led to a desire for autonomy of two territories –

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Abkhazia and South Ossetia – and to the war in the region that involved the deployment of Russian peacekeeping battalions and involvement of the UN. “In both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the introduction of a peace operation and international observers froze the conflict, and both remained unresolved” (Klemenko 2018, 7). Since Russia recognized the independence of the territories that formerly belonged to Georgia, the Georgian government established relations with NATO in order to balance the military presence of Russia in the region.

Like the other conflicts, the heritage of the Soviet time produced the conflict in Moldova and Ukraine. However, despite the deployment of international observers and peacekeepers in the regions and the number of ceasefire agreements, the violence did not stop (Klemenko 2018). Contrary, unresolved conflicts led even to blatant wars as in the case between Russia and Ukraine. Militarization and internationalization of conflicts fueled the tensions and allegedly “legitimized” Russia’s belief in the necessity of its interference for the sake of reconciliation between conflicting parties and establishing regional stabilization.

Naming itself an effective peacemaker, Russia has contested the liberal approach to peacebuilding. The Russian political philosophy of peacebuilding is based on the understanding that the post-Soviet region is the area of its vital geopolitical interests. For that reason, Russian leaders assume that the country has special rights and responsibilities to participate in the conflict resolution process through peacekeeping operations and border security management (Shashenkov 1994). While Russia challenges international law, alters traditional (liberal) approach to peacekeeping, and misapplies Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principles, it also uses ethnic discrimination against the Russian-speaking population abroad as the pretext to intervene.

However, it is not secondary factors that guide Russian peacekeeping behavior but rather an ideological counterweight to the liberal framework and a different understanding of how peace should be made. Naming the Russian peacebuilding approach coercive mediation, Lewis (2022, 653) believes that it “prioritizes order over justice and advocates short-term goals of conflict management over long-term goals of conflict resolution”. Nevertheless, Russian scholars and practitioners do not see its approach to peacebuilding as illiberal or coercive. Oppositely, they believe that peacebuilding is a crucial part of the Russian security strategy for sustaining democracy and global stability that can become an alternative to the liberal model offered by the West.

At the international level, Russia strives to challenge U.S. and European countries through the protection of its ideological allies in Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, and the Central African Republic. By offering alternatives to UN initiatives for peace, Russia frames its peacebuilding model on the commitment to the notion of sovereignty. As a result, the Russian way of conducting peacekeeping operations expanded past the UN’s formal authority and grew into parallel activity outside of the acceptable practice.

Driven by the desire to shape the global agenda and demonstrate its capacity to resist Western notions of democratization and marketization, Russian peacekeeping tactics became known as rigid enforcement aimed at the displacement of Western players from the regions where it intervenes by any means. Thus, Russia does not promote the social transformation to a democratic future, but rather it imposes the order that is beneficial for itself. In this sense, Russia’s intentions are driven by the idea of ousting its rivals from the scene, turning conflicting ground of the country into a battlefield of ideological resistance with the West. One example where Russia is attempting to achieve peace militarily to keep the regime in place is Syria.

Russia’s perception of Western interventionism is considered as being an intrusive activity that encroaches on the balance of world order that Russia tries allegedly to keep in place. Still remembering and constantly questioning the nature of the legitimacy of the bombing in Yugoslavia by NATO in 1999 and the events in Somalia in 1993, Romanchuk (2015, 34) argues that the effectiveness of liberal peacekeeping under the sanction of the UN has been negatively impacted and discredited by U.S. hegemony. According to Russian scholars, Russia’s belief is that the current system of modern liberal peacebuilding is undermined by the “camouflaged” proclamation of the West to dictate the development of modern civilization and by the “Western privatization” of the UN Secretariat, which is why Russian form of peacekeeping necessitated taking a proactive direction in recent years (Shamarov 2022).

In this regard, the implementation of regional and international de-facto peacekeeping operations in the absence of a

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UN mandate but with the consent of the countries where troops are deployed is an important part of Russia's peacekeeping activity since it has a humanitarian orientation and is directed at the restoration of civil order regionally and internationally (Shamarov 2022). However, Russian "self-mandated" operations (Zverev 2013) differ from liberal peacebuilding, which prioritizes the democratization and marketization of the host country's landscape for the sake of restoration of justice, support of respect for human rights, and increase of people's prosperity. That being said, Russian peacekeeping activity has a distinct rationale, which under the shield of stability and protection from the West tries to save the favorable regime that supports the pro-Russian vector of developments.

Such an approach to peacekeeping creates the dilemma of bipolarity where the liberal model that is led by the U.S. and its Western allies who stand for democratic values withstands the distinct forming model conducted by Russia and its non-Western allies. In this sense, Karpovich (2013) fairly notes that peacekeeping operations became a tool in hands of major powers to officially intervene in conflicts and promote their own cultural-civilizational interests by temporarily replacing the functions of international institutions.

Peacekeeping operations take a new form in the modern world where the versatile structure of peacebuilding activity becomes a multifaceted domain conducted by different actors. The standard framework that was established under the auspices of the UN is threatened by such a situation. Currently, the two systems of peacekeeping work in parallel where from one side traditionally mandated peacekeeping preserves the liberal approach, and self-mandated attempts to resolve local conflicts lead to unembedded peacekeeping that lacks international legitimacy. Interestingly, Russia's approach to peacekeeping is mixed.

On the one hand country's military contingents are involved in official missions under the mandate of the UN. In addition to this formal approach, however, Russia undertakes separate attempts to carry out regional peacekeeping under the umbrella of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) or Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) to offer greater legitimacy to its actions since Article 53 of the UN Charter admits the regional arrangements to be mandated operations if they are authorized by the Security Council. However, despite Russia strives to integrate its CSTO into UN peacekeeping activity, it does not always have a UN mandate for such regional operations, which is why Council members are divided in relation to Russia's regional peacekeeping efforts. Especially skeptical are the UK and the U.S. since they believe that Russia's motives under the CSTO resemble "a vehicle for spreading Russian influence throughout the region" (Security Council Report, 2022).

On another hand, Russia uses the strategy of "unbreakable brotherhood" (Borshchevskaya, 2022) in its peacekeeping missions in the near abroad, which implies that Russia will stand for the unity of FSU states and is ready to fight to protect their common interests. In this sense, Russia often conducts peacekeeping drills to practice joint peacekeeping operations that may be deployed under the aegis of regional organizations at the request of their member states. Besides, Russian peacekeeping missions at an international level are also growing in numbers without being officially mandated. Based on bilateral requests, self-mandated peacekeeping bypasses the traditional model of peacekeeping and exists separately in an illegitimate form, therefore undermining the traditional approach and creating a precedent for other countries to intervene at their own discretion.

It is necessary to admit that traditional (liberal and mandated) peacekeeping has been challenged by undemocratic countries such as Russia. This, in turn, poses the danger not only to international institutions but also to global security since the emerging model built on oppositely distinct political philosophies provokes a clash of worldviews between Western countries and Russia.

Contestation between Russia and liberal democracies in different regions of the world for spheres of influence under the pretext of peacekeeping does a disservice to people on the ground in countries torn by conflict and creates "hot zones" in which major powers compete with one another escalating the local conflicts to the global scale. Thus, it is necessary either to preserve the mandated form of peacekeeping and exclude the self-mandated one or to agree on practices of unembedded form in addition to the liberal approach.

By supporting opposite actors in the conflict in a country suffering from unrest – such as support of pro-democratic leaders by the West or pro-authoritarian by Russia – local conflicts not only stay unresolved and frozen but also

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become pawns on the chessboard moved at the discretion of major players. While it is reasonable to think that the logic of the Cold War still dominates relations between Russia and the West, the main danger of such an outdated approach is that it creates instability where an inability to agree on a common vision of peacekeeping efforts leads to the perpetuation of local conflicts.

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