Interview – Philip Cunliffe

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Philip Cunliffe joined UCL's Institute of Risk and Disaster Reduction as Associate Professor in International Relations in August 2022. Prior to that he was Senior Lecturer in International Conflict at the University of Kent. He has also worked in the Defence Studies and War Studies departments of King's College London. He is one of the hosts of the @bungacast podcast. His most recent books include *The End of the End of History: Politics in the 21st Century* (with Alex Hochuli and George Hoare, 2021) and *The New Twenty Years Crisis 1999-2019: A critique of international relations* (2020). He tweets @thephilippics.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

Unfortunately, the most exciting debates happening in the field of International Relations are taking place in the cut and thrust of social media rather than in the academic journals – especially with respect to the war in Ukraine. This conflict has revived very basic but important and sharp-edged debates and questions about geopolitics, polarity in the international system, state power, sovereignty, and nuclear deterrence. The war has exposed many of the IR debates, theories and research of the last thirty years as erudite but essentially apolitical esoterica, baroque intellectual artefacts of the era of unipolar globalisation. So much IR discussion became the luxury ideology of a professional elite that provided the cadre for the political infrastructure of unipolarity: aid and development charities, global NGOs, think tanks, foreign ministries and elite universities. Given that all these various theoretical and professional groups took US unipolarity and global economic growth for granted, its adherents never had to confront hard questions engendered by the struggle over resources and power politics.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

It is a tricky question; there have been many shifts in my understanding over time, but most of them are probably too subtle or insignificant to merit expounding in detail. That said, perhaps one of the most important recent shifts in my thinking has been to take the politics and institutions of neoliberalism more seriously than I did in the past. At least until 2016 or so, I generally found most intellectual discussions of neoliberalism exasperating. More often than not, 'neoliberalism' was used as a swear-word in academic circles, or as a synonym for greed, consumerism, economic growth, or even, at a stretch, modern society itself. Such discussions all seemed very prim, self-satisfied and lazy, as well as being implicitly nostalgic for an earlier period of international capitalism, which had had enough of its own problems to generate neoliberalism in the first place!

However, as neoliberalism fades into history, it becomes easier to talk about coherently, I think. Quinn Slobodian's book *Globalists* was particularly influential and instructive for me in this regard. Although I believe he thought he was writing a retrospective vindication of the anti-globalisation movement of the 1990s, to my mind his book turned out to be a scathing critique of the European Union, the organisation that constitutionalised neoliberalism across the continent. I always recall Slobodian's recounting of how frustrated the neoliberals of the inter-war period were, as they surveyed the upstart new nations of Central and Eastern Europe from their vantage point in the former imperial capital of Vienna. A European federation was their way of creating a substitute for the old Habsburg empire, a way of curbing national independence.

Your book *The New Twenty Years' Crisis* was published two years ago. Are the critiques you levelled at the field then still valid, or have the issues changed?

I think events over the last two years have tended to vindicate the arguments in the book. Russia's attempted annexation of eastern Ukraine is the consummation of the process described in the book, by which the liberal international order that emerged at the end of the Cold War entered into slow and irreversible decline from 1999 to 2019. I dated the start of this decline to the NATO war over Kosovo, which set in train the political, ideological and military over-stretch that would lead to the Forever Wars, as well as prefiguring the Russian war in Ukraine. The major differences between the Kosovo and Ukraine wars are that the Kosovo War was conducted through multilateral means in the form of NATO, it secured retrospective UN approval for the intervention in the form of the post-war UNMIK protectorate, and Kosovo's 2008 referendum led to independence rather than annexation by a neighbouring state. Nonetheless, the Kosovo war inaugurated our new era of great power predation and paternalism, justified on the grounds of humanitarian protection, ratified by plebiscite, and ushering in a new age of protectorates in places as diverse as Mali, Central African Republic, South Sudan, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and the Turkish so-called 'safe zone' in northern Syria – among others.

With the return of war to Europe and the emergence of other conflicts globally, where do the norm of humanitarian intervention and the doctrine of R2P, stand today, both conceptually and practically?

Practically, the outcome of humanitarian intervention and the doctrine of R2P can be seen in Libya's forever civil war, in the Ukraine war, in Turkey's interventions across northern Iraq and Syria, in Saudi Arabia's cruel and bloody war in Yemen. The on-going Libyan civil war is a monument to the folly of R2P, one of the most gratuitously anarchic and destructive ideologies of recent times.

As the adherents of R2P tended to be theoretical constructivists of one stripe or another, they tended to place a great deal of emphasis on discourse, and in so doing to adopt the attitude of Humpty Dumpty to the discourse of humanitarian paternalism. That is to say, they seemed to think that their words about humanitarian protection meant just what they chose them to mean – neither more nor less, irrespective of the political, military or strategic context. Like Humpty Dumpty on his wall, perched as they were on top of the structures of unipolarity, it never occurred to them that other, non-Western powers might choose to use this discourse of humanitarian paternalism for their own ends, too. It turned out that humanitarian rhetoric provided a perfect alibi for military intervention not only for Western states, as we saw with the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, but for others too – as we saw with the Russo-Georgian War in 2008, the Russian intervention of 2014 and more recently the full-blown Russian invasion of Ukraine, justified as an attempt to 'de-Nazify' the country. The discourse of humanitarian protection proved much more difficult to limit and restrain when it was taken out of the context of Humpty Dumpty's seminar room.

In conceptual terms, the academic publishing machine continues to churn out pieces on how R2P can be reformed, improved, embedded and what have you. As the theory of R2P placed so much emphasis on the impact of global humanitarian discourse in reshaping state behaviour, it provided one of the most sublime rationales for academic publishing yet conceived – the more R2P discourse, the better the world would become – like a perpetual motion machine that could power itself through its own activity, or a zombie eating its own entrails. Luckily, even this perfect discourse machine seems to be slowly seizing up – the funding for R2P is drying up, and even our dim foreign policy elites are beginning to realise they have greater problems on their hands then deciding which small and helpless country to bomb next.

In any case, I expect the insidious and virulent strain of liberal paternalism that underlaid humanitarian intervention and R2P will mutate to form new and no less pernicious forms. In addition, the Western response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine shows how deeply embedded these ideologies are, despite being deeply maladaptive in terms of their functioning. The Biden administration is filled with liberal Obamanauts who cut their teeth in the foreign policy misadventures over Iraq, Libya and Syria. This is evident in US policy, which has responded to the Russian invasion by stoking a forever war-by-proxy in Ukraine, and trying to carve Russia out of the world economy as if it was a minor, isolated Third World state such as Libya or Iraq, rather than a nuclear-armed major energy and raw materials exporter.

What is the best course of action for NATO members to deal with current crises they face, including both energy and more conventional security issues?

The question presupposes that NATO members all have the same interest on questions of energy and security – which they palpably do not, as the US exports energy, while most European states import it, and the US is protected by the Pacific and Atlantic, while Europe is not. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has provided the US with the perfect pretext to tighten its strategic grip over its European allies' foreign and defence policies, hiking up defence spending across the continent and forcing Europe's states to absorb the costs of the sanctions regime on Russia by tipping them into energy-starved recessions. The advantage to the US of this course of action is fairly clear because the US's LNG exports will substitute for Russian gas. The advantage to European states, who will simply replace one form of energy dependence with another – and at a terribly high cost over this winter and next – is not so clear. Thus, it is difficult to understate the costs of the NATO geopolitical strait jacket: factories are shutting down across the continent, major economies are hovering on the brink of a deep recession, and governments are drawing up plans for energy rationing. The fact that some of the wealthiest, most technologically-sophisticated states in human history are unable to secure the conditions of their own functioning as industrial societies is a terrible indictment not only of their technical competence, but also of their capacity to form and shape their own national interests. Clearly, energy independence – independence of both the US and Russia – is the answer. If European states really want to secure themselves, they will need to find ways to assert their interests outside of the dead hand of NATO, that relic of the Cold War that ended up creating a new cold war to justify its continued existence.

Has there been a shift in the way both non-Western nations and Western nations see the utility of peacekeeping?

Again, I would argue that peacekeeping as we know it today is best understood as an artefact of unipolarity, when there was relative harmony on the UN Security Council. Since the end of the Cold War, peacekeeping enabled Western states to lower the costs and risks of their frivolous military interventions and nation-building experiments by outsourcing most of the labour-intensive tasks to peacekeepers drawn from the poorer members of the United Nations or the member-states of the African Union. In this way, they developed a de facto system of low-rent, soft military occupation on the cheap – it was cheaper collectively to pay for blue helmets from Ghana, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Kenya, Rwanda and Ethiopia, etc., to deploy in places such as Sierra Leone or Democratic Republic of Congo, than to deploy Western forces there. As a result, Western states rarely had to confront hard-political or security trade-offs concerning the risks, consequences and costs of their military adventurism. Poorer states could earn hard-currency from UN reimbursements for their peacekeepers, while simultaneously burnishing their international reputations and hobnobbing with major powers in the corridor diplomacy of the UN.

As unipolarity seems to be fading, if indeed it is not already over, I do not think we will continue to see growth in the numbers or size of UN peacekeeping operations – their numbers peaked around 2016. If we do see another spurt of peacekeeping operations, it would probably require some kind of détente on the UN Security Council, or perhaps a series of grand diplomatic bargains that would tie together peace deals in Syria with ceasefires in Ukraine and the Caucasus, or some such. In such a scenario, peacekeeping might return to an earlier, pre-unipolar form, in which peacekeepers acted as adjuncts of diplomacy rather than as the demiurge of nation-building.

Your recent book *The End of the End of History*, co-authored with Alex Hochuli and George Hoare, aims to dissect and understand global politics in the current era. Are there any cases of movements, states, or organisations in global politics that you think understand the difficulties of this new era and demonstrate an ability to meet its challenges?

The book was intended to cohere, summarise and expand upon some of the insights that we gained from the discussions we had both amongst ourselves and with guests, as part of our podcast, @bungacast. In the book, we argued that, while it was clear that the End of History regime inaugurated in the 1990s was drawing to a close, there has been no clear paradigm to replace it. Liberal centrism and technocratic rule are breaking down everywhere, but there is no new ideological project to replace it – see for instance, Giorgia Meloni's accommodation to the European Union in the recent Italian elections. If the logic offered in our book is correct, then we would not expect to see any

collective agency or capacity that could meet the challenges of this new era – at least for the mid-term, foreseeable future. So far, this view seems to have been borne out: the industrialised states of Europe are preparing for energy rationing this winter – which represents a failure to function as modern countries, let alone meet the grand challenges of our era.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

The challenges of world politics that we confront today are less amenable to the luxuriant and self-indulgent theorising that continues to dominate IR. Solving the problems of our day requires the kind of intellectual creativity, rigour and precision that has been lacking in the nebula of unipolar theorising. The magnitude of our collective problems should force young scholars to rise to the challenge, especially as these decadent orthodoxies of the preceding era slowly wither away. Given this context, my advice would be – be willing to challenge consensus. We're entering a new political era, and it is in such moments of systemic transition that the rewards for intellectual creativity and political boldness are significantly greater than they would be in more settled and quiescent times.