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## Conflict management or conflict resolution: how do major powers conceive the role of the United Nations in peacebuilding?

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### ABSTRACT


This article examines how major powers conceive the role of the United Nations (UN) in peacebuilding. We conceptualize the UN's role along the distinction between conflict management and conflict resolution and distinguish between the types of tasks and the approach the UN can adopt. We map states' conceptions of the UN's role in peacebuilding by coding peace-related speeches at the UN Security Council (1991–2020) delivered by China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States as well as Brazil, South Africa, and Turkey as rising regional powers. Our findings show that states' conceptions differ regarding the type of tasks the UN should do. However, the main fault line between the countries lie in the approach the UN should adopt to conduct peacebuilding tasks. We conclude that major powers see a role for the UN beyond mere conflict management as long as it is done with respect for national sovereignty.

**KEYWORDS** United Nations; multipolarity; peacebuilding; conflict management; conflict resolution

Peacebuilding is the flagship activity of the United Nations (UN). It was defined by former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali in his “Agenda for Peace” as the “action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify peace” (United Nations, 1992). As of August 2022, the UN deploys 12 peacekeeping operations led by the Department of Peace Operations and 24 field missions led by the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (special envoys and special political missions).

Looking at today's world politics, scholars and practitioners have started to discuss the future of UN peace operations in the nascent multipolar world order (Cassin & Zyla, 2021; Coleman & Williams, 2021; de Coning, 2021; de

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Coning & Peter, 2019; Kenkel & Foley, 2021; Osland & Peter, 2021). Multipolarity is characterized by more diffused power structures. States, such as China and Russia, have become competitors to the U.S. dominance (Paris, 2014). Other powers, such as Brazil, India, South Africa, and Turkey, also play increasingly important roles in world politics (Call & de Coning, 2017b; Paul, 2018). These states may have different views on UN peacebuilding from the ones promoted by the United States and its allies in the unipolar early post-Cold War years.

Scholars have inquired into non-Western states' approaches to peacebuilding, mainly through case studies (Adhikari, 2021; Bratersky & Lukin, 2017; Fung, 2016; Call & de Coning, 2017b; Jütersonke et al., 2021; Kobayashi, 2020; Kobayashi et al., 2022; Lewis, 2022; Peter & Rice, 2022; Yuan, 2020, 2022). They have explained that traditional and rising powers may differ in their conceptions of peacebuilding, in that the latter emphasize national sovereignty and ownership, have longer-term perspectives, prefer technical cooperation over aid, and mostly work with national governments rather than directly with civil society actors (Call & de Coning, 2017a; Peter & Rice, 2022). One emerging critique of this literature is that non-Western states' conceptions have often been framed as illiberal, producing two main categories according to which countries are grouped: liberal and Western versus illiberal and non-Western (Jütersonke et al., 2021; Yuan, 2022). More generally, scholars debate the influence of these trends on the future of UN peacebuilding. For instance, Osland and Peter (2021) argue that multipolarity will limit the role of the UN to tasks related to conflict containment. Similarly, de Coning (2021) observes that large-scale ambitious operations are less likely to be deployed in the medium term.

We contribute to these debates by shedding light on an overlooked—albeit important—element: How major powers conceive the role of the UN in peacebuilding. In line with the UN's own definition and other scholars (Barnett et al., 2007; Call & Cousens, 2007; Smith, 2004), we adopt a broad approach to the application spectrum of peacebuilding, defining it as actions before, during, and after warfare. The question of the UN's role in peacebuilding is all the more important in today's context of increased contestation of international institutions and global governance (Dingwerth et al., 2019; Hooghe et al., 2019; Kruck & Zangl, 2020; Newman, 2007; Stephen & Zürn, 2019; Zangl et al., 2016; Zürn & Stephen, 2010). Although contestation and critics of the UN have always existed, they take new shapes and their normative basis has changed due to global power shifts. In particular, contestation by rising powers can be an opportunity to redefine the role of international organizations (IOs) and the values underpinning multilateral actions to reflect 21st century world politics (Jacob, 2021). On the other hand, scholars also note that rising powers contest the representational content of the international order rather than its normative basis

(Newman & Zala, 2018; Richmond & Tellidis, 2014). Whatever direction contestation takes, we know that states' views and attitudes toward IOs differ (Stephen, 2012; Zürn & Stephen, 2010). Thus, it is important to look at how states conceive the role of the UN as a peacebuilding actor. In contrast to earlier studies, which have mostly provided content-focused analyses inquiring into states' approaches to peacebuilding, we propose an actor-focused analysis that asks: What role do states assign to the UN in peacebuilding?

We develop a framework of states' conceptualizations of the UN's role in peacebuilding along the distinction between conflict management and conflict resolution. We further distinguish between the *types of tasks* the UN is legitimized to carry out and the *approach* through which it should carry out these tasks. Methodologically, we provide the first systematic mapping of states' conceptions of the UN's role in peacebuilding by coding member states' peace-related speeches at the UN Security Council (UNSC) from 1991 to 2020. Our sample of countries includes three types of actors, which aims to reflect current balances of power: the "P3" being France, the United Kingdom, and the United States as Western permanent members of the UNSC; China and Russia as non-Western permanent members of the UNSC; and Brazil, South Africa, and Turkey as rising regional powers. Our findings show that the eight states have indeed different—and sometimes antagonist—conceptions of the UN's role in peacebuilding. However, these differences do not follow a strict liberal/illiberal distinction, as sometimes portrayed in the literature, but rather lie in the way the UN should conduct peacebuilding tasks. We conclude that states do see a role for the UN in a multipolar world order in terms of tasks beyond mere conflict management as long as it is done with respect for national sovereignty and in cooperation with state authorities.

This article advances scholarship on states' conceptions of peacebuilding in three ways. First, we complement the content-focused literature on states' approaches to peacebuilding with an actor-focused analysis of what role they assign to the UN in peacebuilding. Second, we disaggregate states' conceptions into tasks and approaches in peacebuilding, thereby providing for more nuances and overcoming binary classifications of liberal/illiberal and Western/non-Western. Third, this article relies on an overlooked source of information in the peacebuilding literature: speeches delivered at the UNSC. Overall, we contribute to a better understanding of the impact of multipolarity on peacebuilding by discussing what role powerful states assign to the UN in this new world order.

The article is structured as follows. We first situate our research in the existing literature and introduce our theoretical framework. We then discuss the methods used and the data analyzed before presenting our

empirical findings. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings and suggestions for future research avenues.

## **Conceptualization of the UN's role in peacebuilding**

### ***Crisis of multilateralism and critics of liberal peacebuilding***

To understand the UN's role in peacebuilding in a context of changing world politics, we define UN peacebuilding as an institution in the sense of a "collection of practices and rules defining appropriate behavior for specific groups of actors in specific situations" (March and Olsen, 1983, p. 948). The constitutive practices and rules of UN peacebuilding have changed over time and have reflected a broader consensus, referred to by Paris (2003) as "global culture." In the early post-Cold War era, this global culture was based on liberalism and hence UN peacebuilding was mostly justified in relation to liberal principles such as human security and the responsibility to protect (Ogata & Cels, 2003; Tadjbakhsh, 2010). The liberal peace agenda was strongly pushed by Western powers, led by the P3—France, the United Kingdom, and the United States—as permanent members of the UNSC. In recent years, however, we have seen an increasing contestation of the liberal international order. This has implications for both the UN as an institution and its role in peacebuilding.

Regarding the first, scholars largely agree that multilateralism is in crisis (Zürn, 2021). Constitutive of this crisis is the fact that IOs are contested by citizens, states, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Contestation from states comes not only from emerging powers but also from Western democracies where populist and nationalist forces have gained more political power (Ikenberry, 2018; Jones & Stedman, 2017; Turner & Kühn, 2019). This increasing contestation and global power shifts pose challenges to multilateral institutions (Dingwerth et al., 2019; Kruck & Zangl, 2020; Newman, 2007; Stephen & Zürn, 2019; Zangl et al., 2016; Zürn & Stephen, 2010), including the UN. Indeed, its incapacity to bring armed conflicts, such as Syria, Yemen, and most recently Ukraine, to a negotiated end is an illustration of this crisis (Hellmüller, 2021).

Regarding the second, the liberal approach to peacebuilding is also in crisis. Liberal peacebuilding can be defined as "the promotion of democracy, market-based economic reforms and a range of other institutions associated with 'modern' states as a driving force for building 'peace'" (Newman et al., 2009, p. 3). In the mid-2000s, scholars started to criticize liberal peacebuilding for its flawed underlying assumptions of universality (Call & Cousens, 2007; Mac Ginty, 2008; Sending, 2009), for maintaining an unequal power balance based on Western dominance (Chandler, 2010; Duffield, 2007; Pugh, 2004), and for leaving a very fragile peace in many contexts, if a

peace at all (Jabri, 2010; Richmond, 2008; Tadjbakhsh, 2010). These critiques heralded a “local turn” in peacebuilding (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013), with authors underlining the need for international peacebuilding to more carefully interact with local actors, dynamics, and processes (Björkdahl et al., 2014; Hellmüller, 2013, 2018). Some scholars proposed alternatives to liberal peacebuilding, such as the concepts of “hybridity” or “pragmatism” as post-liberal approaches (Chandler, 2017; Mac Ginty, 2011).

### **Conceptualization of the UN's role in peacebuilding**

With multilateralism as well as the liberal approach to peacebuilding in crisis, the question is what role can the UN play in building peace across the globe? To answer this question, we analyze how major powers conceive the UN's role in peacebuilding. To do so, we draw on the distinction between two main approaches to peacebuilding prevalent in the literature: conflict management and conflict resolution (Miall et al., 1999; Ramsbotham et al., 2005). The two concepts have different views on what peacebuilding should entail (*tasks*) and how peacebuilding should be done (*approach*).

Conflict management is based on the assumption that war is endemic to international relations and can never be fully avoided due to unavoidable differences of values and interests between states. Thus, all that can be done is to manage it by containing violence. This is achieved through bargaining and negotiation between the belligerents (Marchetti & Tocci, 2009). The focus of conflict management is on the result in the form of a settlement of a conflict that enables the end of violence and foresees institutions that can channel conflicts in the future (Miall, 2004). This also means that the status quo is generally accepted. As a consequence, the main *task* of the UN according to this approach is to help the parties through high-level diplomacy to find a settlement<sup>1</sup> and to monitor that settlement once it is reached, for instance by sending an observer mission. As such, the UN should mostly aim at ending violence in view of establishing a negative peace. Given that only a minimal role for third parties is foreseen, the main *approach* of the UN to peacebuilding according to conflict management theory is state-centric in that it should strictly uphold the sovereignty and consent of the host state.

Conflict resolution, in turn, considers war as avoidable and aims at addressing the root causes of conflict. It seeks to find a common ground between the parties' different underlying interests (Marchetti & Tocci, 2009), trying to identify solutions that may have been missed due to entrenched positioning (Miall, 2004). Conflict resolution therefore goes beyond power bargaining and allows for a stronger role of third parties to help the belligerents move from their positions to their interests in order to find a mutually acceptable agreement, because “peace requires more



**Table 1.** UN roles in peacebuilding.

	Conflict management	Conflict resolution
Tasks	Tasks ensuring end of violence (negative peace)	Tasks addressing root causes of conflict (positive peace)
Approach	State-centric approach	Societal approach

than a deal among the parties” (Wallensteen, 2019, p. 8). As such, the main *task* of the UN according to conflict resolution theory is to support wide-ranging peacebuilding programs addressing the root causes of the conflict in view of building a long-term positive peace. This involves tasks beyond traditional security conceptions. For instance, since underdevelopment and the absence of a law-based political system are considered as drivers of conflict, tasks also include promoting economic reforms and the rule of law. The main *approach* of the UN to peacebuilding according to conflict resolution theory takes a societal rather than a state-centric focus. While the idea is still to work with the respective governments, it also foresees an important role for other actors, such as civil society. It is important to note that we do not equate the conflict resolution approach with liberal peacebuilding. While they may overlap in some instances, the objective of conflict resolution is not necessarily the enabling of a liberal transition as the root causes may also be addressed through other (illiberal) means.

Table 1 summarizes our conceptualization of the UN’s role in peacebuilding. The distinction between tasks and approaches allows for the possibility that states consider the UN’s role as a mix between the two ideal types of conflict management and conflict resolution. For instance, a state could legitimate conflict management tasks, but with a conflict resolution approach or vice versa.

## Data and methods

To capture states’ conceptions of the UN’s role in peacebuilding, we conduct a qualitative content analysis of peace-related speeches delivered by member states in the UNSC from 1991 to 2020. To do so, we build an original dataset of speeches coded with the software Nvivo.

### *Dataset on UNSC peace-related speeches*

Within the UN, the most important arena in the area of peace and security is the UNSC. The UNSC is the organ with primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security (Article 24, UN Charter). It is composed of five permanent members with veto power and ten non-permanent members elected for a two-year term by the General Assembly.<sup>2</sup> The UNSC is the only UN organ with the right to issue binding resolutions

(Sievers & Daws, 2014). Beyond its formal authority, it is also a “performative space” (Curran & Holtom, 2015) with strong symbolic power (Hurd, 2002), in which states manifest their role, power, and involvement in the international arena. In sum, the UNSC’s discussions reflect the main themes of international politics.

To analyze states’ conceptions of the UN’s role in peacebuilding, we built a dataset of peace-related speeches delivered at the UNSC by major powers (Badache et al., 2022). We focused on the speeches of three categories of actors: (1) France, the United Kingdom, and the United States as Western members of the P5; (2) China and Russia as non-Western members of the P5, and (3) Brazil, South Africa, and Turkey as non-permanent members and rising regional powers. The inclusion of the so-called “P5” is justified by the fact that these five states have a crucial role and influence in peacebuilding, mainly because of their veto power. We selected Brazil, South Africa, and Turkey among the non-P5 regional powers as they have been active in peacebuilding-related issues. For example, in the last two decades, Brazil has been engaged in many peacebuilding efforts and has enhanced its political weight in shaping the global discussion in this regard, as can be seen for instance in its participation in the creation of the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission in 2005. South Africa is active notably in peacebuilding in Africa and chairs the UNSC Ad Hoc Working Group on Conflict Prevention in Africa (Nieuwkerk, 2012). Turkey’s role in UN-led peace missions has increased since 2000. Moreover, Turkey also started its own experience of peacebuilding and stabilization endeavors in Somalia (Akpinar, 2013). In addition, they all are members of the G20. Brazil and South Africa are also BRICS members and belong to the IBSA (India, Brazil, and South Africa) dialogue forum.

To compile a corpus of single peace-related speeches for the eight countries from 1991 to 2020, we followed two main steps. Firstly, we retrieved the relevant UNSC meeting records (documents coded as S.PV). The pdf documents were extracted from the UN Digital Library. Using the “speeches” research engine of the library,<sup>3</sup> speeches containing the word “peace” in the title of the meeting (for instance *peacekeeping*, *peacebuilding*, maintenance of international *peace* and security) were extracted for each country in the analyzed time period. The main limitation of this selection criteria is that it excludes country-specific meetings because the agenda title of such meetings usually reads as follows “The situation in country X.” The advantage of this selection is that we retrieved states’ conceptual discourses on peace, not necessarily influenced by their specific interests in a given country. Furthermore, we only selected speeches when countries were speaking in their own national capacity and not in another role, that is, as president of the UNSC or chair of a commission for instance. Then, we manually checked the extracted speeches to avoid possible tagging mistakes during