Book review

*Aspects of Peacekeeping*, Gordon, D.S. and Toase, F.H.
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One of the defining characteristics of complex peace operations is their multi-dimensional nature. They combine conflict prevention; peace making; security operations; humanitarian relief and reconstruction activities; transitional justice and rule of law programmes; human rights monitoring and education; political transition support and institution building in a complex and multi-layered peacebuilding response matrix that is intended to build momentum towards peace across the whole conflict spectrum.

A key feature of the systems approach to conflict resolution is that its success relies on the free flow of information. For the system to work, the different components must constantly adjust their own actions in response to progress or setbacks experienced elsewhere in the network. In practise, however, complex peace operations are burdened by institutional cultures and traditional management and command structures that discourage information flow. They block, hinder or distort the flow of information and this starves the network from the information it requires to self-regulate. As a result, the network breaks up into smaller and smaller networks. When this tendency is not managed, complex peace operations develop information silos that operate, at best, independently of each other, or at worst, against each other. This is why civil-military coordination has become such a critical success factor in complex peace operations.

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It is thus a rare pleasure to find a book that manages to capture the complexity of contemporary peace operations as well as this compilation by Stuart Gordon and Francis Toase. The book successfully brings together a large number of the different components present in contemporary peacekeeping and begins to explore the nature of the relationships among these organisations, institutions and constituencies. This is a crucial area of focus if we want to improve our understanding of the dynamics that influence the complex network of interests present in contemporary peace operations, and represent the critical divide between complex and classical peace operations.

The editors have divided the book into three parts, the first deals with the evolution and change experienced in the United Nations and the international system over the past decade; the second with the role of humanitarian action in peacekeeping and the third with the changing role of the military in peace operations.

This is the second book in a three part Sandhurst Conference Series that aims to chart the important themes “for the British Army, and perhaps every Army, in the post-Cold War era.” The first explores the impact of the media on military operations and the third examines the broad impact of the dissolution of the Former Yugoslavia.

The weakening of the concept of State sovereignty; the shift from state to human security; the acceptance of the supranational role of the United Nations across several fields and a new commonality among the members of the Security Council, all contributed to the deployment of unprecedented numbers of UN peacekeepers into situations that would never have been contemplated before the end of the Cold War. The first part of the book, on the evolution and change of the United Nations and the International System, deals with these watershed experiences in Somalia, Bosnia and Rwanda in the early to mid 1990s, but stops just short of the more positive UN experiences in Kosovo and East Timor in 1999. Gordon and Toase argue that those early deployments represent a shift in the purpose of peacekeeping, because peacekeeping was utilised as a tool to create the conditions for peace rather than safeguarding and monitoring an existing peace. This, they argue, was the birth of the arguably still-born, concept of “strategic peacekeeping”. The dominating influence of these experiences in the Former Yugoslavia is felt throughout the book, but it also contains useful insights into developments in Africa and Eastern Europe. This part of the book includes chapters on the humanitarian security dilemma (by Shasi Tharoor and Ian Johnstone); the evolution of UN command and control structures and regional perspectives on Europe, Eastern Europe and Africa.

The second portion of the book focuses on humanitarian action and peacekeeping. The challenging operational environment so well captured in the first part of the book was particularly demanding on the humanitarian community. Weakened perceptions of State sovereignty; the growing acceptance, among States and civil society, of the right of humanitarian intervention; the intentional targeting of civilians; the large