Karen Mingst and Margaret Karns, *The United Nations in the 21st century*. Third edition

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1 Introduction

The United Nations in the 21st Century, by Karen Mingst and Margaret Karns, is the third edition of a highly regarded introductory text on the United Nations (UN). Previously published under the title, *The United Nations in the Post-Cold War Era*, the current volume retains many of the qualities that made its predecessors so popular. The book is a concise, yet substantively rich, introduction to the subject matter. The volume is well-researched, drawing on any array of historical and contemporary sources. The coverage is broad and the analysis often trenchant. Though marketed as an introductory text, both practitioners and the general public will find the volume accessible and informative.

2 Overview

The organization of the volume is similar to that found in other introductory treatments of the UN. Chapter 1 lays the requisite historical and conceptual foundations. The authors provide a summary of the major events and historical trends that have shaped the UN since its founding. The chapter also includes a brief presentation of realism, liberalism and constructivism—three prominent theoretical traditions that inform scholarly analysis of the organization. The chapter concludes with a presentation of three “dilemmas” whose understanding the authors contend is essential to grasp the role of the UN in the twenty-first century.

Viewing UN activities through the prism of these dilemmas represents the signature contribution of the volume. Each dilemma directs the reader’s attention to an issue that bears directly on the (ir)relevance of the UN. The first is “(the) need for governance versus the UN’s weaknesses.” Noting that transboundary problems and growing interdependences are leading to a steadily-growing “demand” for cross-border cooperation, the authors question whether the UN is capable of providing an adequate “supply” of cooperation given its structural and administrative weaknesses.

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The second dilemma is framed as one of “sovereignty versus challenges to sovereignty.” The authors begin from the widely accepted position that sovereignty has been, and remains, the organizational cornerstone of the current international order. They note that the UN Charter itself enshrines sovereignty as a central pillar of the system. And yet, the forces of interdependence and globalization are progressively, and some would say inexorably, eroding sovereignty and, in so doing, undermining the organizational foundation of the system. What does this development portend for the future of the nation–state and, by extension, for the UN itself? The third dilemma is “the need for leadership versus the dominance of a sole superpower.” By many measures, the US is a dominant, if not hegemonic, power in world politics. One might, therefore, expect the US to provide the leadership required to address problems of the sort highlighted by the first dilemma. But, the authors argue, the US has repeatedly proved itself either unwilling to provide that leadership, or it has taken positions that openly put it at odds with most in the international community. In light of this, they ask whether the need for leadership can be reconciled with the existence of an independent-minded superpower. And, if not, from where will the requisite leadership come?

The balance of the volume is organized into two parts. Chapters 2 and 3 comprise the first part. Together they offer an analytical excursion into the key actors and institutions that make up the UN system. Chapter 2 introduces each of the principal UN organs. More than simply a recitation of decision-making structures and operational responsibilities, the authors open a window into the political dynamics of the various bodies. Chapter 3 complements the discussion of UN structures with an examination of the broad range of actors that operate within, and seek to influence the actions of, UN institutions. Although primary attention is given to members states, the authors also discuss the role of various non-state actors, including the UN Secretariat and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Chapters 4–7 constitute the second part of the volume. In these, the authors discuss four substantive issues—peace and security, economic development and sustainability, human rights, and human security. Each chapter explores the role played by the United Nations, including its achievements, the challenges it has faced, and prospects for (and barriers to) effective UN action. The authors adopt a similar presentation for each issue—a general overview is supplemented with select case studies.

Chapter 4 examines the role of the UN in preserving international peace and security. The presentation addresses each of the topics one would expect to find—collective security, peacekeeping, arms control and disarmament, and terrorism. In their discussion of collective security, the authors make a useful distinction between traditional notions of collective security and the use of force by “coalitions of the willing.” The discussion of peacekeeping is well-done, if burdened by the need to simplify what is a diverse and operationally complex set of tasks. Finally, after providing an overview of major achievements in the area of arms control and disarmament, the chapter concludes with an analysis of UN efforts to address international terrorism in the post-9/11 era.

Chapter 5 engages the subject of economic development and sustainability. Again, the authors do a fine job touching on the major dimensions of the issue. The presentation is informed and balanced. Adding a twist not found in the previous chapter, the authors review of major “policy debates” that have shaped, and continue

to shape, discourse on international development. These include discussions of the New International Economic Order, the role of multinational corporations, and the Millennium Development Goals. To the authors' credit, they also discuss an aspect of development that does not usually garner more than a mention in other introductory texts—the role of women in development. Despite the generally strong presentation, those expecting a robust discussion of the International Monetary Fund, World Bank Group or World Trade Organization and how they relate to the UN will be disappointed.

Human rights are the subject of Chapter 6. This is perhaps the strongest chapter in the volume. The authors provide the reader a sense of how the UN's role has evolved over time—from articulating rights, to monitoring, promoting and, most recently, to taking efforts to enforce rights. The overview is complemented with a series of very well-crafted case studies. Some are “conventional” choices (e.g., the anti-apartheid campaign, genocide), others are not (e.g., women's rights, slavery and slave-like practices). The chapter concludes with an analysis of human rights in light of the three dilemmas set out in Chapter 1. Taking a “glass is half full” approach, the authors suggest that progress to date is remarkable, particularly in light of the “weak” UN monitoring and enforcement instruments and the absence of sustained leadership from major powers (the US, in particular).

Chapter 7, the last substantive chapter of the volume, addresses the subject of human security. Two dimensions of the topic are explored—the environment and global health. The authors begin by tracing the evolution of UN efforts to identify and address global environmental challenges. They touch on a range of initiatives, including, most notably, the Rio Conference. With regard to global health, the authors point to the role played by UN agencies in helping to contain the recent outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS). They also examine UNAIDS and other efforts to address the ongoing challenge presented by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. With respect to both the environment and global health, the authors provide a useful and informative overview appropriate to an introductory volume. Particularly welcome is the discussion of “lessons learned” in how to address effectively environmental problems. It is unfortunate, however, that a corresponding set of “lessons” is not offered for global health.

The volume concludes with the obligatory examination of the future of the UN. The challenge of reform is the guiding theme. Representation is one area ripe for reform. Critics argue that the make-up of the Security Council no longer reflects political realities. Many also ask whether NGOs should be accorded some form of formal representation. Reforms are also needed to enhance the UN's institutional capacity and operational effectiveness. But, in asking whether member states have the political will to affect fundamental change, the authors are blunt in their assessment. Note the authors, “we are not more likely to see fundamental changes in the twenty-first century than we were in the preceding post-Cold War era” (p. 258).

3 Comment and Critique

The United Nations in the 21st century has much to recommend it. Unlike many academic books, the volume is eminently readable. The writing is direct, clean and uncomplicated. Descriptions are matter of fact. Explanations are to the point. And the authors (mercifully) avoid unnecessary jargon. Tables and figures complement the

text without being a distraction. In short, the volume is easily accessible to even the most rank novice on the UN.

With respect to the substantive content of the volume, the authors strike a sensible balance between breadth and depth of coverage. Certainly, there are more detailed texts currently on the market.¹ But some would argue that there is virtue in concision. Stripped of excessive detail, the presentation encourages the reader to identify and understand key issues. The volume also incorporates little “extras” not found in other similarly-oriented volumes. In addition to a copy of the UN Charter (a standard addendum), the Appendix also includes a glossary of key terms and a compilation of UN-related websites. But, perhaps the feature that most sets the volume apart from other introductions is the use of “dilemmas” as a thematic device linking the different chapters. The representation of the dilemmas at the end of each issue-oriented chapter encourages the reader to place developments in a broader context. It especially encourages the reader to think about how the trajectory of events are (and will be) shaped by the tensions highlighted by each dilemma.

Although intended as an introductory textbook, the authors raise issues that will be of interest to scholars. Here, again, the presentation of the “dilemmas” prove their value. Take, for instance, the purported disconnect between the demand for collective action and the UN’s “weaknesses”. To the extent that the United Nations lacks the capacity to address transboundary problems, are their alternative forms of governance that could effectively address them? The European Union has, for instance, demonstrated its ability to address effectively (if imperfectly) some of the same issues addressed by the UN. Does regional cooperation or, perhaps, issue-based functional cooperation, represent a viable alternative to the UN’s “global” model of cooperation? Another subject touched on by the authors is evolving meaning (meaningfulness) of sovereignty. The evidence that interdependence, economic and otherwise, is eroding sovereignty raises questions about the continuing viability of the nation–state. If, indeed, the nation–state is under assault, in what “direction” are social orders likely to evolve? Are the effects centripetal (toward political, economic, social aggregation and integration), centrifugal (toward disaggregation and decentralization), or both? And what implications does each have for the future of the UN?

For all its strengths, the volume has some weaknesses. I offer three general observations. First, readers are likely to find the use of theory uneven and its value-added unclear. Although this volume does better than some at integrating international relations theory, the presentation is brief. Instructors seeking a richer theoretical “core” might wish to incorporate supplemental materials.² Second, the volume provides little in the way of comparative referents. The authors discuss few international organizations outside the UN system. And those that are discussed receive limited attention. For this reason, though the text is ideal for a course limited in scope to the United Nations, it is difficult to see how it alone could sustain a more broadly-cast course on international organization.³ Finally, those interested in international law will find little attention to the subject matter. The

¹ See, for instance, Ziring et al. (2005), or Weiss et al. (2007).

² In this regard, one might consider Rittberger and Zangl (2006), Barkin (2006), Pease (2007).

³ Pease (2007) offers an explicitly comparative treatment. Indeed, the authors of this volume themselves offer a more comprehensive treatment of international organizations (Karns & Mingst 2004).

authors do make appropriate reference to the UN Charter and the role of the International Court of Justice. However, the thrust of the volume is clearly on UN politics and political processes. Again, those instructors who wish to explore the topic will need to incorporate supplemental materials.⁴

In conclusion, *The United Nations in the 21st Century* is an interesting and engaging introduction to the United Nations. It is scholarly without being pedantic. Some may be disappointed that it does not have greater theoretical sophistication or empirical depth. But, that would be to misunderstand the book's audience and purpose. The volume is intended to be a concise entrée into the politics, institutions and function of the United Nations for those with little or no previous background on the subject. And, judged against that standard, the volume succeeds. The book is suitable for political scientists and non-political scientists alike. It is ideal either as a central or supplemental text for undergraduate courses on international organization.

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⁴ For an introductory-level text that provides a good treatment of the international politics of international law, see Rochester (2006).