

Martialling Peace: How the Peacekeeping Myth Legitimises Warfare

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Nicole Wegner, a lecturer and researcher at the University of Auckland's Faculty of Arts, Politics, and International Relations, focuses on Feminist International Relations, Gender, and Critical Military Studies. Drawing from these theories and concepts within the field of peace and conflict studies, she examines the myths and perceptions surrounding traditional peacekeeping. In her book, *Martialling Peace: How the Peacekeeping Myth Legitimises Warfare* (Wegner, 2023), she explores how these myths legitimize certain forms of violence while naturalizing and normalizing others. The author relies and focuses heavily on Canadian peacekeeping philosophy and practice, which informs the bulk of the concepts and themes that the author introduces, like martial peace and peacekeeping mythology/myth. The research uses discourse analysis as its methodology for studying the topic.

The first chapter delves into the inherent martial nature of peacekeeping, which often goes unnoticed due to its association with peace. The peacekeeping myth perpetuates and reinforces this martial dimension by advocating for the necessity of military violence to 'keep the peace,' thereby promoting a broader militaristic ideology. The author argues that peace is not a neutral concept but a political term that reflects the global political status quo. Peacekeeping is legitimized not by its practices or character but by its overarching objective of achieving peace. Often rooted in the concept of negative peace, martial peace becomes the primary goal of peacekeeping missions. While militarism and peace may appear as opposing concepts, they are deeply intertwined in practice and within global political structures.

The second chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the mythologization of the peacekeeping myth. Myths are often regarded as apolitical narratives or stories that shape collective consciousness, serving to normalize specific ideas or practices. Central to the peacekeeping myth are the following notions: peace is inherently desirable and attainable; military interventions are apolitical and conducted for the greater good; and peacekeepers are moral, legitimate, and impartial actors. The virtues and principles

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commonly associated with peacekeeping (non-violence, impartiality, and consent) further reinforce these perceptions.

The author contends that the deliberate perpetuation of these myths facilitates the proliferation of increasingly militarized forms of peace worldwide, all while deflecting critical scrutiny of the militaristic force employed. This chapter underscores the need for a critical examination of the practices and principles that sustain martial politics both within and beyond state boundaries, often under the guise of the justified use of force.

The third chapter examines Canada's identity as a peacekeeping nation. It explores how its peacekeeping ideology stems from and reinforces its national identity and culture through significant emotional and political investment in these practices. This investment is rooted in the symbolic values associated with peacekeeping, which align with Canada's collective self-image as a helpful and compassionate global actor. This national identity, in turn, sustains and amplifies Canada's peacekeeping ambitions, creating a powerful myth that shapes public and political perceptions of its military engagements. These engagements are often assumed to embody the same values and principles as peacekeeping operations, such as being 'helpful, innocent, and benevolent' (Wegner, 2023, p. 44).

The Canadian peacekeeping myth is actively reinforced by the government, media, and educational institutions. However, this myth has also demonstrated resilience by incorporating more combative operations and practices to promote peace and stability. This is evident in Canada's involvement in the War in Afghanistan and its treatment of Indigenous peoples, both of which reveal narratives steeped in neo-colonialist attitudes.

The chapter also highlights Lester B. Pearson's pivotal role in integrating peacekeeping into Canada's foreign policy objectives. The concept of a 'middle power' (Wegner, 2023, p. 59) in international relations theory is also discussed as a framework for understanding Canada's positioning. As a state unable to rival great powers but still capable of exerting influence over third-world nations, peacekeeping offers Canada a strategic opportunity to enhance its credibility and impact on the global stage.

The broader implications of the peacekeeping myth include its role in obscuring Canada's military history. However, the increasing reliance on military interventions and combat-oriented tactics threatens to undermine this carefully constructed narrative.

Chapter four discusses Canada's role in the Afghanistan War and how the political and military leadership attempted to adapt and shed the peacekeeping image to unfavourable results, ultimately reverting to the original formula of neutral, compassionate, and non-violent actors and 'white saviours' (Wegner, 2023, p. 76) In this chapter, the author observes the peacekeeping myth through gendered, racial, and colonial perspectives that attempt to explain and uncover truths behind the narratives portrayed by the media and political institutions in their attempts to position themselves as a source of good, peace, and stability. Humanitarian stories and troop sacrifices were used to silence or divert attention from the combative practices and approach of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF). Canada attempted to shed the feminine peacekeeping persona in favour of a more masculine militaristic identity through the war in Afghanistan. This new identity was inherently racialized, that justified white justice, and reproduced the saviour complex associated with neo-colonial practices (Wegner, 2023, pp. 79-80).

Chapter five examines how the peacekeeping myth permeates the Canadian state, manifesting in violent military interventions against local Indigenous populations throughout various eras of Canadian statehood. The author argues that this myth functions as an instrument of state-building, transferring values and characteristics traditionally associated with the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP). Simultaneously, the depiction of Afghan terrorists as ‘savages’ is mirrored in the characterization of Indigenous tribes and communities seeking reparations and justice. In this narrative, the Canadian population is framed as the victim whose safety is allegedly under threat, thereby justifying protective measures by state forces.

The chapter highlights the close relationship between the CAF and the RCMP, noting that the latter has also contributed to UN peacekeeping missions. The author provides detailed accounts of militarized actions undertaken by the police while acknowledging the Indigenous communities’ enduring resistance and their history of violent encounters with state forces. Historical events and clashes are discussed alongside unethical and immoral practices by the police, including excessive use of force, vigilantism, and under-reported incidents of sexual violence against Indigenous populations. Although these practices are less overt in contemporary times, the author contends that such tropes remain embedded within the norms and operations of these forces. The overarching narrative of maintaining order aligns with the concept of martial peace.

The author concludes by revisiting the key themes discussed throughout the book. Central to the analysis is the argument that the ostensibly peaceful image of peacekeeping is fundamentally flawed, deeply martial in nature, and requires a comprehensive restructuring. The author critiques the concept of ‘peace’ brought about by peacekeeping missions, describing it as materialized peace—a superficial state where reconciliation is absent, and root causes of conflict remain inadequately addressed. The book advocates for more rigorous academic scrutiny of existing peacekeeping literature and practices, urging the development of non-militarized peacekeeping models rooted in conflict resolution approaches. Additionally, the author emphasizes the importance of addressing the structural issues of conflict-stricken societies through justice and reparations.

One of the book’s key strengths is its critical examination of the existing peacekeeping culture, norms, traditions, and literature, exposing their inherently militarized nature. The author effectively unmasks the martial underpinnings of peacekeeping practices, often concealed behind a facade of neutrality and benevolence. The critique highlights the dangers of militarized peacekeeping narratives and practices in conflict zones and liberal democracies.

The author’s theorization of martialized peace—a fragile, short-term peace dependent on military presence and lacking cultural or structural transformation—provides a compelling explanation for the recurring failure of peacekeeping missions. This fragile peace often results in societal relapse into conflict, as the root causes remain unaddressed. Additionally, the book problematizes the self-perceived ‘peace-loving’ persona of major and middle-power liberal democracies, which is used to justify violence and militarized policing within their borders. This critique of the peacekeeping myth offers valuable insights into the narrative construction that enables such militarized practices.

Despite its contributions, the book is not without limitations. Its reliance on Canada as the primary case study is a significant flaw. While Canada offers an intriguing example—given its reputation for peaceful attitudes being ingrained in its national identity—this narrow focus limits the generalizability and transferability of the themes explored. The absence of a broader analysis of UN peacekeeping missions or even specific case studies of individual missions weakens the book's capacity to address the global scope of peacekeeping practices.

Furthermore, the author's attempt to reconcile Canada's internal violence against Indigenous populations with the broader critique of peacekeeping risks misdirecting the analysis. This focus may divert attention from the actual historical injustices faced by Indigenous communities, such as economic and social deprivation, political marginalization, and entrenched cultural discrimination.

The book highlights a critical gap in the literature concerning the myth-making surrounding peacekeeping and raises the fundamental question of why peacekeeping missions often fail. However, future research could benefit from exploring the neo-colonial undertones of peacekeeping missions and their racialized and gendered dimensions. Such analysis would deepen the understanding of the structural inequalities embedded in peacekeeping practices and their implications for conflict-affected societies.

While the book provides a critical lens for examining peacekeeping practices, a more expansive and comparative analysis of global peacekeeping missions would strengthen its arguments and broaden its applicability. Nonetheless, the work remains valuable to the discourse on peacekeeping, state-building, and the narratives underpinning militarized practices.

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