

Incredible Commitments: How UN Peacekeeping Failures Shape Peace Processes
by Anjali Kaushlesh Dayal, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2021, pp. 213, ISBN 978-1-108-84322-5 Hardback.

The credible commitment problem refers to the inability of parties in a conflict to commit to a peace agreement because they distrust the other party to keep up their end of the bargain. This problem is the prevailing explanation for why parties in a civil war cannot resolve their conflict peacefully without the involvement of a third party, such as the UN. According to this dominant view, UN peace operations make negotiated settlement possible by providing essential security guarantees that address credible commitment problems.

In *Incredible Commitments: How UN Peacekeeping Failures Shape Peace Processes*, Anjali Kaushlesh Dayal contests this prevailing explanation by presenting an alternative theoretical framework in which combatants seek international assistance due to various distributional and reputational reasons, but not because of a predominant security concern. According to Dayal, parties in a peace process learn from highly visible failures of UN peacekeeping elsewhere but keep requesting UN assistance. As combatants often have strong reasons to doubt the UN's ability to address commitment problems and deliver credible guarantees, the credible commitment theory of war termination is incomplete, if not flawed: "our understanding of peace operations has overstated the credibility concerns that drive combatants to seek international intervention and understated the ways in which distributional and status concerns lead warring parties to seek out international assistance" (p. 3).

Dayal's theory has two central pillars. First, UN peace operations form social connections that link different missions in a shared social context. Such social linkages emerge as a structural property with significant consequences: "the UN's behavior anywhere could inform combatants' decisions everywhere" (p. 31). Combatants pay close attention to the UN's successes and failures, draw lessons, and adapt their strategies accordingly. Dayal posits that if the proposed distributional theory is accurate, then parties in a peace process "should make direct and explicit reference to the UN's past performance" during negotiations (p. 51). Second, "peace and security are not necessarily

primary goals for many parties to peace talks” (p. 13). Instead, combatants pursue material, tactical, reputational, and other symbolic gains. In this regard, “alleviating the credible commitment problem may not be the most important benefit” of UN interventions (p. 51).

After a convincing discussion on methodology and case selection, Dayal turns to Rwanda (Chapter 4) and Guatemala (Chapter 5) to test the implications of her theory. Using process tracing, Dayal shows that the UN’s failures in Somalia and Burundi informed the combatants’ behavior and expectations during the Arusha negotiations (1990-1994). Similarly, interlocutors in Guatemala frequently drew inferences from the UN-led peace process in neighboring El Salvador. These findings support the hypothesis that UN peace operations share a common social context.

In addition to establishing the presence of social linkages between UN peace operations, Dayal reveals that both in Rwanda and Guatemala, combatants were not exclusively focused on security guarantees, but also pursued distributional and symbolic benefits. Dayal recognizes security concerns in Rwanda but also emphasizes post-conflict reconstruction, restructuring of the armed forces, and refugee resettlement through UNHCR assistance as the primary concerns during the Arusha negotiations. In Guatemala, the distributional theory performs better than the credible commitment hypothesis. Tactical, material, and symbolic benefits both the government of Guatemala and the rebel group URNG pursued from international assistance “actively led these parties to minimize the UN’s efficacy as a security guarantor” (p. 146).

The book has several strengths. First and foremost, Dayal reminds us that the credible commitment hypothesis, which is principally derived from formal models of rationalist explanations for war, cannot be taken for granted without thorough empirical investigation. Process tracing and careful dissection of peace negotiations function as invaluable instruments to carry out such a task. Dayal’s in-depth analysis shows that there is so much more to international assistance than the standard credible commitment story. The emphasis on the shared social context and the linkages between UN peace operations is another important strength. The empirical evidence supports that such social linkages and learning processes are indeed present and consequential in negotiations.

Dayal's in-depth and well-conducted case studies advance our understanding of peace processes in Rwanda and Guatemala. Dayal relies on an impressive amount of qualitative data. She uses interviews, biographies, and archival work to trace historical processes and unravel crucial steps in negotiations. The case study on the Arusha negotiations is particularly important because the Rwandan genocide and its aftermath received much scholarly attention, but the long peace process preceding the catastrophe has not.

Dayal's interviews with prominent members of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) are enlightening. One point deserves special emphasis: the UN's previous role in decolonization, elections, and refugee assistance in the 1950s and 1960s frequently appeared in the interviews, even though Dayal had not prompted questions in this direction. Dayal uses this to further question the "geographical and chronological separation between time periods and peacekeeping missions" that are often assumed in empirical studies (p. 9). Previous experience with international assistance and UN agencies can be retained in the memory of the peacekept and influence peace operations even decades later.

Finally, case studies reveal the rich heterogeneity within negotiating parties. In both peace processes, the government side was fragmented but the rebel side demonstrated greater discipline and coherence. This aspect uncovers that fragmentation is not a problem unique to rebel groups.

In terms of weaknesses, there are three minor issues. First, Dayal relies on a typology of three distinct types of actors: desperate negotiators, hardliners, and spoilers. Such a typology risks oversimplifying complex processes and assigning static features to dynamic actors that evolve and adapt to changing circumstances. Second, it is not entirely clear whether Dayal's distributional hypothesis is contending or complementary to the credible commitment hypothesis. Both readings coincide with some segments of the book, rendering this tension rather a minor distraction. Finally, Dayal suggests that UN involvement in the peace process contributed to the post-conflict violence in Guatemala (p 10). Although this is not a central argument of the book, it is a strong claim that is not backed with equally strong evidence. Considering that the prevalence of gangs, organized crime, and narco-violence is a regional problem hurting several neighbors of Guatemala, this claim is not as convincing as the other arguments presented in the rest of the book.

In sum, Dayal presents a thought-provoking re-evaluation of the credible commitment theory from a fresh viewpoint. Her work is relevant not only for scholars and policymakers interested in UN peacekeeping, but also for those who are studying peace processes in Rwanda and Guatemala.

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