Review


Alexander O’Riordan
alexanderoriordan@gmail.com

Theo Neethling and Heidi Hudson’s *Post-Conflict Reconstruction and Development in Africa: concepts, role-players, policy and practice* is a well-compiled collection of perspectives on the how South Africa should position itself towards peace keeping. The book is a South African National Defence Force (SANDF) attempt to complement its 2012 Defence Review with an academic (civilian) perspective. In essence, the question running through the book’s 11 chapters (drafted by a collection of largely South African and African academics) is what it means for South Africa to play a peace-building role on the continent.

South Africa (254) has ‘found itself in the league of countries such as Nigeria, Rwanda, Ghana, Ethiopia, Egypt, Senegal and Morocco…all important troop-contributing nations in the international peace missions arena’ and is ‘one of the top 15 contributors to UN peace missions’. In this arena, South Africa appears to be looking for a script. In the 1990s, South Africa’s defence establishment was largely focused on transformation but this is gradually giving way to peace-keeping as a feature of foreign policy. In this space, there is a growing awareness of a policy and capacity gap. On the one hand, there is no clear idea of how peace-keeping conforms to the vision of an ‘African renaissance’. And, on the other hand, SANDF appears to be insufficiently resourced to be an effective peace-keeper. As Maxi Schoeman (Chapter 10, 213) points out, it is not clear that SANDF has the
‘unconventional capabilities’ necessary ‘to deal with new threats such as militarised non-state actors (including terrorists and transnational crime cartels)’ that so often feature in the context South Africa hopes to be effective in. At the same time, SANDF does not appear ideally resourced to deal with conventional threats either. Greg Mills reports (Chapter 11, 241) that ‘there remain ongoing shortages of maintenance and other technical personnel…[and] a related challenge…is in the gap created between those left (usually above 50 years of age) and the influx of trainees (usually below 25)’. This combined with a clear underestimation of the cost required to finance such operations and capacity clearly question whether South Africa’s electorate is prepared to pay for ‘guns over butter’ (267).

In this regard, the questions posed by the book to a certain extent mask the lack of a consistent and comprehensive rationale for such an interventionist approach in the first place. To begin with the reader should be aware that the book was ‘commissioned by the SA Army [making] it hard to avoid a South African lens’ (7). The book is a response to the failure of ‘Thabo Mbeki [and/or] Joe Modise [to] provide vision or guidance’ resulting in some critics to argue that both the 1995-1996 and 2012 Defence Reviews suffer from the same problem in that they put forward a policy that plans ‘the future on the experience of the past’ thus not being contextualised or goal driven. While what is to be achieved by South Africa in the peace-keeping space is not clearly explained, some of the motivations are touched on. South Africa wants to play a more important role on the international stage and particularly in Africa ‘with peacekeeping viewed as part of the price you have to pay to be among the nations who make the rules’ (218-9). With over a third of African countries being ‘in the post-conflict phase’ (2) getting into peace-keeping, is a fairly self-explanatory means to bulking up South Africa’s foreign policy capabilities. At the same time, there are clear industrial-economic interests at play too. ‘In an era of dwindling budgetary support, militaries are hard-pressed to fulfil their dual roles’ (217) of defending the state and supporting peace-building abroad. In South Africa’s case, the hang-over of the much criticised arms deal means there is an enormous incentive to find a new narrative to finance military procurements.

However, the real problem the book exposes is an evident lack of understanding and willingness meaningfully to engage and learn from South Africa’s more advanced peers in this space. The book continually puts forward the argument that post-conflict reconstruction and development can be wedded together into a special role that South Africa can play better
than many other international actors. However, the book does little even to investigate how other actors work in this space and particularly the lessons learned by Western powers linking and in some case ring-fencing peace-keeping from development. If it did, it would find that in all post-conflict countries there is a humanitarian and a development architecture that serves to coordinate and bridge the gap between relief, recovery and development. This architecture is hardly mentioned (eg 256) even though it is vital to the post-conflict reconstruction and development approach South Africa appears to be putting forward. In fact there is little mention that in order meaningfully to engage in post-conflict reconstruction and development South Africa will have no choice but to make its interventions relevant to the substantially larger Western donors that shape recovery and development in post-conflict contexts.

Furthermore, conflict and peace-keeping often appear poorly conceptualised. For a start not enough attention is paid in the book to protracted emergencies and conflicts that often go much deeper than the officially categorised political conflict. So for example, little attention is paid to the fact that the on-going conflict between Sudan and South Sudan has as much to do with the relatively recent fight for independence as it does with the multi-generational conflict between dinka and miserya over access to water and grazing. And in this regard, the nature of conflict often also appears to be reduced to ‘some form of perceived inequality’ (25). It is almost as if the book exposes its South African origins by invoking a narrative that treats problems as solvable provided there is equality and redistribution. In reality, conflict is dirtier and messier than this; resentment, disruptors (so-called ‘spoilers’), economic, regional and international political and security interests are much harder to understand and address let alone address through redistribution and calling for equal access to resources. Unfortunately, this is also where the book could have done more to ask under what conditions South Africa’s peace-keepers will be seen as welcome or what is more likely, seen as partisan and, in fact, part and parcel of the enemy. Joseph Kony, for example, sees UN peace-keepers as just another extension of a Western-backed occupation and legitimate targets regularly attacked and looted. Remarkably, South Africa’s policy makers seem to think that the country’s unique history will exempt South Africa from similar accusations of bias and comparable assaults.

All in all, the book is a meaningful contribution to the literature and should be read for its sound analysis and important South African perspective on
post-conflict reconstruction and development. Many of the chapters not cited in this review also provide important insights and analysis particularly in providing a historical perspective, conceptualising and looking at the normative conditions that make South African intervention abroad possible as well as the relationship with the African Union and United Nations. In this regard, Neethling and Hudson’s work will undoubtedly influence future research agendas as well as providing an important backdrop to future critical scholarly work.