
Review

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THE UNITED NATIONS IN THE 21ST CENTURY, FOURTH EDITION

Karen A. Mingst and Margaret P. Karns
Westview Press, 2012
360 pages, paperback, \$39.00

This book looks at the role of the international body in a world infused with rapid transformations. With the advent of constant change and transformation in the international political and economic arenas, amongst a plethora of others, the book zeroes in on world politics that will have a more prevalent role to play in the new century. It touches on the issue of emerging economic superpowers, such as China, Russia, Brazil, and India; reinforcing the already accepted idea that nation-states are now flexing economic muscle more than military. In light of economic prowess playing a major role on the world stage, the authors claim that since the UN is economically insignificant its stature in world affairs is diminished. The reason for such an assessment is that organizations like the IMF, World Bank, WTO and G20 play a much more important role on the world economic stage, and the UN has been allotted a backseat.

A major theme in the book is the idea of the “three UNs.” When assessing the global body, the authors remind the readers that the following should be put into perspective: “the UN of governments, the UN of staff members, and the UN of closely associated NGOs, experts, and consultants.” Furthermore, the authors argue that due to the organization’s state-centric focus on international relations, the third UN, the one of NGOs, has been the most neglected and that does not bode well for a world where such elements have long-lasting effects on nation-states.

Another major theme is reform within the UN, which is required to improve its work in areas of human rights, economics, human security, and its role in maintaining international peace. The overall conclusion of the book is that the UN must reform and adapt to the demands and challenges presented to it. The authors present a solid case that unless the UN reforms to meet “the demands for governance and the challenges of diminished sovereignty, and find states and coalitions able and willing to lead” it will become increasingly irrelevant. According to the cases presented, there is a need for the UN to reform in light of the constantly shifting global

geopolitical and economic directions and arrangements. Reform is also required to eliminate the stagnation at the UN, and to renew its relevance as the central international body.

The United Nations in the 21st Century is intended as a university course-based text book. It provides ample information on the dynamics of the 21st century world politics that have shaped the role of the UN. Political science and international studies students at the undergraduate and graduate levels would find this work useful. It would be an excellent resource for a researcher as well. For the reader seeking a thorough history of the UN, a breakdown of the organization, its sections, the roles of states and non-state entities, for example, this would be the resource to look at. The section on economic development and sustainability will be of interest to researchers, students, and anyone working in the sphere of economics and development. The authors describe the UN's capacity at promoting economic development within member states; in addition to the evolution of development in the UN system. Anyone with a basic understanding of the UN will find this book to be a relatively easy to read.

Unlike the third edition, the 2012 version focuses on the issues that shaped world affairs in the second decade of the new millennium. For example, the previous edition looked more at the history of the international body, in addition to the effects of globalization on the new millennium, the effects of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the political divisions as a result of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, threats to human security, the HIV pandemic, and, finally, the genocides in Africa. The fourth edition still retains a history section on the UN, titled "The Evolution of the UN System," with the main focus being the persistent problems and challenges of reform that the international body faces. One of the main weaknesses is that the book does not answer one of the key questions presented: "does the UN make a difference"?

This book is a good starting point to understanding the UN, and a relevant resource for research. It is highly recommended for students and it is well worth noting that the authors attempt to answer important questions, but not always directly. They do not gloss over the shortcomings of the international body; however, rather than answering questions directly, like "does the UN make a difference", they deflect by highlighting some of the UN's alleged accomplishments. For example, they state that the UN

supports developing new ideas; filling knowledge gaps, gathering data; setting, promoting and monitoring goals; agenda setting; and partnerships. The authors present this list of accomplishments as proof that the UN is making a difference.

Despite the alleged difference being made by the UN, the authors remind the reader that the UN remains the product of the international state system, with each member state retaining its sovereignty; therefore, there is no way to enforce decisions or to force states to comply by said decisions. The assessment of the difference the UN makes or can make needs a more a nuanced evidenced based analysis.

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