**Book Forum**

**Informal Practice as a Driver of Change: The UN Security Council and Darfur**

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In recent years the UN Security Council has come under increasing criticism, particularly in light of its failure to address the most pressing threats to international peace and security. As tensions between major powers have grown the relative paralysis of the Council has led to growing calls for significant change and reform.[[1]](#footnote-1) Yet much of the discourse surrounding the Council’s current status has predominantly focused on the overall legitimacy of the institution itself in regard to its rules and functions. In notable contrast to this literature, Jess Gifkins in her book *Inside the UN Security Council* takes us deeper into the inner workings of the Council, to address how decisions get made and the techniques utilised by member states to build legitimacy for their actions. In order to analyse these processes, Gifkins works to combine novel insights from both practice theory and the study of legitimacy. Central to this theoretical innovation is the fleshing out of what the book terms legitimation practices, essentially ‘the processual dimension of legitimacy’ (p.1). These legitimation practices are understood as being internal or external in focus and both help to explain how a decision or actor is legitimatised. In providing this theoretical framework the book is able to shed light on the more day-to-day process of legitimacy seeking, opening up new insights into the predominantly informal ways in which changes occur and new practices are developed within the Security Council.

Whereas international relations scholarship on the study of UN legitimacy is mostly preoccupied with assessing rules and agenda setting[[2]](#footnote-2) or the perceptions of member states in the institution,[[3]](#footnote-3) *Inside the UN Security Council* provides a much more social and ideational approach that reveals the relational nature of legitimacy in decision making. This focus on legitimation practices provides an innovative way to interpret the wider motivations of actors when making decisions and importantly, recognises the interesting ways in which both internal and external audiences matter. Most significantly, placing greater emphasis on the daily interactions of diplomats rather than the traditional International Relations focus on the state in an abstract sense. This allows Gifkins to make several important arguments regarding the central case study of the book, the Security Council’s decision making in regard to Darfur (2004–2007).

One of the major advantages of this focused study is the way in which the book skilfully challenges many taken for granted assumptions concerning state motivations in the Darfur case. Most notably, the largely materialist logic that has driven a lot of discussion around the actions of key states in responding to the atrocities that unfolded in Darfur. The book provides a far more nuanced analysis, highlighting how states shifted their positions in dramatic ways across months and years. This again helps to challenge simplistic assumptions that often point to the Darfur case as one easily defined by Western advocacy compared to Chinese opposition. In contrast, what the book is able to effectively show is that member states continued to shift policy positions throughout negotiations, influenced by both internal and external legitimation practices. Through this analysis, Gifkins carefully reveals the motivations behind the changing position of Western states, demonstrating that it was not awareness of the scale and nature of the violence that turned them towards an advocacy position, but instead external legitimation practices that shaped the shift in policy. Most notably, the salience of the issue for domestic audiences, particularly in the United States, and the connected media advocacy (p.100).

Another key contribution of the book is its ability to shed new light on the interplay and competition between different parts of the UN Secretariat as well as the influence the Secretariat can have on individual state policy. This really comes to the fore in Chapter 7, which focuses on the complex process of securing consent for peacekeeping in Darfur. One of the real strengths of this chapter is how it forensically unpacks each stage leading up to the eventual hybrid peacekeeping operation agreed by the Security Council. It goes on to highlight how the office of the UN Secretary-General was able to construct a clear strategy that could be sold to all parties involved, moving beyond the previous deadlock between states. Consequently, the alternative strategy created by the UN Secretariat proved critical in eventually encouraging Beijing to build consensus for this approach in Khartoum (p.183). What is noteworthy in this analysis is the recognition of the UN Secretariat acting not just as a technical advisor but also as a lobbying agent that can create strategy and instruct states on how it should be implemented.

While the book clearly acknowledges the unique nature of the Darfur case, particularly the overall level of engagement by states, the Secretariat, and NGOs at this time, there are obviously some limitations to the research given its very specific focus and time-frame. Some readers may be left wanting to hear more about how the Darfur case may compare to other situations that the Security Council has dealt with and the extent to which the analysis of legitimation techniques can provide new insights across different cases. Furthermore, there remains a question of how we might compare or evaluate the significance of certain policy shifts over others in the process of analysing legitimation practices. For example, when it comes to the issue of implementing sanctions in the Darfur case, Gifkins outlines how China was initially against any imposition of sanctions but later moved positions, in part due to its sensitivity around blocking a key decision within the public setting of the Security Council. Yet as the author goes on to note, the eventual sanctions agreed were not meaningly enforced and had almost no impact on the ground. Thus, one may be left asking whether such negotiations ultimately matter, when a state may already know that the agreed measures are very unlikely to make any difference or impact on their own distinct foreign policy interests. Consequently, while the book purposefully seeks to avoid taking a clear normative stance, there remains further work to be done on how we might critically assess the value of legitimation practices in certain contexts.

Another key conclusion of the book that warrants greater reflection moving forward, is the recognition that almost all of the policy shifts taken by states in the negotiations on the Darfur case were shaped by a perception of audience cost. Yet whilst the specific audience may often differ between domestic and external, it was not those suffering on the ground, directly impacted by the mass violence, who are identified as the most critical audience to frame decision-making changes to. This certainly supports previous research surrounding the limits of humanity-based arguments and their utilisation in attempts to motivate states to address and respond to mass atrocity crimes.[[4]](#footnote-4) Consequently, given the changing nature of multilateralism and current geopolitical rivalries, there remains a vital need to better understand the relative influence of different audiences on decision making and the extent to which certain audiences, such as domestic ones, may now matter much less than during the time of the Darfur crisis focused on here.

Finally, the book briefly engages with wider debates concerning the future of UN reform agendas, making a case for why there is a need to give more focus to the process of how decisions are made rather than concentrating solely on the importance of reaching more decisions in the Security Council (p.210). Gifkins does not specify much further detail about what this might mean in terms of practical steps, but the book provides a vital starting point for framing these future conversations and reflections. Moving forward, *Inside the UN Security Council* looks set to be an incredibly influential book when it comes to reimagining how we can study and theorise the UN Security Council and its processes of decision-making. Moreover, it will also likely provide an important blueprint for further innovative research on diplomatic practices and legitimacy when it comes to the study of other multilateral institutions globally.

1. ‘UN Doc A/78/PV.35’ (United Nations General Assembly, 16 November 2023). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Brian Frederking and Christopher Patane, ‘Legitimacy and the UN Security Council Agenda’, *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 50(2) 347–353 (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Martin Binder and Monika Heupel, ‘The Legitimacy of the UN Security Council: Evidence from Recent General Assembly Debates’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 59(2) 238–250 (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Samuel Jarvis, *The Limits of Common Humanity: Motivating the Responsibility to Protect in a Changing Global Order* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)