

BOOK REVIEW

Navigating the Middle Ground: Unpacking the Role of Mid-space Actors in Hybrid Peacebuilding in Asia

Giselle Lugo Miole
Waseda University, Tokyo, Japan
glmiole@fuji.waseda.jp

Operationalization of Hybrid Peacebuilding in Asia: From Theory to Practice by Yuji Uesugi, Anna Deekeling, Sophie Shiori Umeyama, and Lawrence McDonald-Colbert (Eds.), March 2021 Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, 203 pages, ISBN: 9783030677602 (Open Access)

Introduction

Mac Ginty and Sanghera (2012) defined hybrid peacebuilding as peace consisting of different practices, norms, and thinking converging from the interaction of different groups.

Operationalization of Hybrid Peacebuilding in Asia, edited by Uesugi et al., has expanded the framework of hybrid peacebuilding by presenting case studies in Asia. In contrast with *Hybrid Peacebuilding in Asia* by Uesugi (2020), a previously edited book, this book has extended the current literature on hybrid peacebuilding and emphasizes the concept of mid-space actors. Mid-space actors are described to be vital agents for peace processes, serving as “power brokers” and bridges between outsider and insider actors. Uesugi et al. further contributed to the ongoing literature on peacebuilding in both policy and academic circles.

The book consists of nine chapters, with each discussing dynamics that challenge the current literature on hybrid peacebuilding. Chapter 1 is an expansion note of Uesugi’s (2020) first book on hybrid peacebuilding which attempted to challenge Mac Ginty and Richmond’s (2016) concept of “hybrid turn.” Chapter 2 is the literature review section of the book’s theme that has identified the knowledge gaps based

on the investigated consensus and debates among scholars in different peacebuilding theories. Chapter 3 introduces adaptive peacebuilding that aims to aid in coping with unintended dilemmas faced by hybrid peace. Chapter 4 focuses on critiquing the typology of mid-space actors to explore the operationalization of hybridity, not just as a descriptive one but as a practical tool. Chapters 5-6 are cases of much-discussed operationalization of hybridity, consisting of analyses on peacebuilding processes in Cambodia, emphasizing identity, and Mindanao, emphasizing the role of civil societies. Chapters 7-8 explore China and Japan’s roles as peacebuilding actors. Lastly, Chapter 9 covers an overall critique of operationalizing hybrid peace and offers to include mid-space actors as a “viable focal point” for social cohesion, resilience, and inclusive societies.

Through its multiple findings and key insights into inquiry, this book fills the gap of the ongoing work on hybrid peace. At the same time, it has provided key critiques. It does not solely focus on peacebuilding but also includes linking together the disciplines of political science, religion, and non-state actors such as civil societies.

Although the *Operationalization of Hybrid Peacebuilding in Asia* emphasizes the role of mid-

space actors in the hybridity of peace, the authors could have expanded their literature review further. One humble suggestion is to enumerate the factors that can strengthen and modify mid-space actors. It would also be helpful to inform the readers about its important initial considerations before applying it in practice during conflict prevention. The role of mid-space actors that are applicable in the classic resources for conflict resolution could also be expanded. These resources include, but are not limited to, the United Nations (2013) *Integrated Assessment and Planning Handbook* and *Interactive Conflict Resolution* by Fisher (1997). The authors introduced the concept of adaptive peacebuilding as a facilitative aid toward operationalizing hybrid peace. However, they should expound further on the ways of operationalizing adaptive peacebuilding for clarity.

Nevertheless, the book can be among the key resources for future scholars and researchers of the ongoing debates in peacebuilding. This review examines the dimensions of mid-space actors, as discussed in Chapter 4. It also explores the concept of adaptive peacebuilding, as introduced in Chapter 3.

Enhancing Mid-Space Actor Typology: Critical Legitimacy

In the quest to explore the realization of hybridity, Deekeling and Simangan (Chapter 4) have further characterized the nature of mid-space actors by examining their network of social and power relations. The authors have explored the interaction of outsiders with mid-space actors as local-bridge builders during the peace process (p. 61). They also challenged the existence of mid-space actors, which consequently became gatekeepers at the local level. Examples provided include religious leaders, security officers, and official representatives. Uesugi and Kagawa (2020) argued that gatekeepers possess a low chance of spoiling a peace process. Deekeling and Simangan, on the other hand, counterargued that gatekeepers can still have higher chances of spoiling, and such spoilers are essential in peace processes (p. 66).

On that note, Deekeling and Simangan raised an important character of mid-space actors, which is the possession of ambivalence of the gatekeepers. With this, mid-space actors can either turn into spoilers or local bridge-builders. In addition, Deekeling and

Simangan critiqued the typology of gatekeepers by acknowledging the local legitimacy and access to information (p. 68). The chapter has concluded that gatekeepers are agents of hybrid peacebuilding, and for outsiders to interact with them would require intricate measures. These measures include transferring knowledge and assisting in capacity building. Furthermore, outsiders would build ease of access to information at the local level.

The chapter, however, lacks further scholarship on the critical legitimacy of the gatekeepers. As Uesugi and Kagawa (2020) argued, mid-space actors must be locally grounded. And what do they mean by *locally grounded*? To what extent are gatekeepers knowledgeable about the local information? How are they recognized and treated in the community?

Although Deekeling and Simangan released a critique on the idea of gatekeepers, further explanation of the legitimacy of mid-space actors must also be kept in political consideration. They have enumerated Buddhist monks, religious leaders, and security officials. However, it is not always the case in a region or country with a mix of conflict and post-conflict zones.

To briefly illustrate, “dubious” actors exist, such as leaders assigned by the legitimate ruling party whose trust and social recognition are questionable in the community. One key example can be found in Mindanao, which is the region in the Philippines that is home to the most indigenous groups in the country. Although each indigenous community in Mindanao composes of its respective rulers, it is in the consciousness of the people that the Philippine government assigns dubious indigenous leaders and councilors to expedite the consultation process of seeking the consent and agreement of an indigenous community upon corporations’ request to mine and use their lands for business. This, in turn, works to the advantage of local politicians and serves their self-interests, especially when their power controls the ancestral lands and domains of the indigenous peoples for non-consensual transnational mining and agribusiness.

With these in mind, I propose expounding on the critical legitimacy of the involved gatekeepers in the hybrid peacebuilding literature. These include critical legitimacy concerns, pre-intervention considerations, whom they are based on the locals’ perceptions and narratives, and their history and familial genealogy.

By ensuring the legitimacy of the gatekeepers, the ease of access to information could be expedited further. However, seeking legitimacy may require a vigorous commitment which comes at a cost in time and resources for an effective engagement in the peace process.

Further Prospects to Adaptive Peacebuilding: Adaptive Actors

De Coning and McDonald-Colbert, in Chapter 3, introduced adaptive peacebuilding as an approach with an influential role in social systems. Hybrid peacebuilding in an adaptive process must involve the capacity to thrive in a changing environment (p. 51). The authors have comprehensively explained the prospects of adaptive peacebuilding, as well as the adaptive process. However, the authors should also have further explained the operationalization of adaptive peacebuilding by giving a few examples from conflict and post-conflict zones.

One probable example of adaptive peacebuilding is Japan's cooperation initiatives in Mindanao. Before, Japan emphasized the *hitozukuri* (human resources development) principle that focused on the development of human resources in its early years of development assistance work in the region. However, Japan learned its lessons after criticisms of its "checkbox" diplomacy and its hardware, infrastructure-heavy cooperation in the post-Cold War period. In the early 2000s, Japan took a proactive position by incorporating the principle of human security by establishing grassroots programs.

Having understood the concept of adaptive peacebuilding and mid-space actors, I propose the concept of "adaptive actors."

Adaptive actors can serve as the gatekeepers that Deekeling and Simangan have previously argued, and only a few of them involved in the conflict can be one. With this, the scholarship on adaptive peacebuilding could be expanded as an essential component of mid-space actors by noting its applicability in respect of the context of a conflict. I argue that within the process of adaptive peacebuilding, the legitimacy of the adaptive actors remains to be part and parcel of the operationalization of hybrid peacebuilding. In line with conflict assessment and pre-intervention analysis, the adaptability of involved mid-space actors must

also be assessed carefully. Questions may include the following: What would be the possible consequences for actors they may face mid-way? How would they adapt to the remaining resources available? These assessment questions can be practically applied to the hybridity of peace.

Conclusion

Mid-space actors have become a central component of hybrid peacebuilding. Most chapters have described the positionality of mid-space actors, as well as their social and power relations and capabilities.

However, one unaddressed issue in the book is possessing a critical assessment of the context of a conflict. Most chapters have provided fair assessments of Cambodia and the Philippines, as well as in the previous edited book by Uesugi (2020), Indonesia, and India. All these examples are in the context of post-conflict zones. What about those with existing conflict issues, such as Myanmar?

To challenge hybrid peacebuilding further, scholars must include not only post-conflict zones but also analyze occurring conflicts. Perhaps the positionality, power relations, and legitimacy of mid-space actors might have a different phenomenology in contrast with this book.

The political dimensions of the states in conflict and post-conflict situations must also be considered. Although Cambodia and the Philippines have served as good contrasting examples, it would be more interesting to compare how the hybridity of peace is shaped and challenged based on their political systems. There are questions to be raised, such as how the hybridity of peace is calculated in an authoritarian or democratic state, and why such a phenomenon happened in that context. As for mid-space actors, more emphasis on non-state actors, namely, coalitions, non-governmental organizations, and social movement convenors, are essential in expanding the emerging literature on hybrid peacebuilding.

With all things considered, the book is deemed a fundamental resource for the growing literature on peacebuilding and can be functioned as a key reference for future scholars and researchers of hybrid peace.

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