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The imperative of success: United Nations Peacekeeping in Cambodia (1991-1993)

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In the early 1990s, the United Nations achieved in Cambodia an outcome that has been promoted as an important and rare peacekeeping success. The *United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia* (UNTAC) was, at the time, the largest, most expensive and most complex UN peacekeeping operation in the history of the United Nations and a key experiment in the laboratory of post-Cold War peacekeeping. Although UNTAC was confronted with one major spoiler party, the notorious Khmer Rouge, the mission's leadership supposedly resisted venturing into peace enforcement and succeeded in achieving the mission's end goal of holding democratic elections in May 1993. However, UNTAC's outcome has been all too readily interpreted in the light of the peacekeeping failures in the former Yugoslavia and Somalia. Using large quantities of newly declassified documents, especially from the archives of the United Nations, this study breaks with the traditional narrative that ascribes the causes for "success" in Cambodia to a strict adherence to the traditional peacekeeping principles. It reveals that under the imperative of turning the mission into a success, and paradoxically, saving the credibility of UN peacekeeping itself, UNTAC eventually violated the core principle of impartiality by forging an alliance with the government faction against the Khmer Rouge. The historical analysis thereby demonstrates that the theoretical and legalistic distinction between peacekeeping and peace enforcement has long distorted a thorough understanding of the true challenges in UN peacekeeping operations. It exposes that it rather is the political willingness to accept risks that constitutes a central determinant of how a mission's mandate is interpreted and executed.

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