

Book Review: Changing Norms Though Actions: The Evolution of Sovereignty

Blog Admin

*This book seeks to examine the manner in which sovereignty, a bedrock norm of international relations since the seventeenth century, has evolved in response to changing conceptions of the responsibilities of government. **Jennifer M. Ramos** looks specifically at what happens to sovereignty when states choose to bypass traditional norms of non-intervention on behalf of other competing norms, such as those regarding counterterrorism, human rights, or weapons of mass destruction. A great strength of the book is that it sets out clearly the debate and background to the issues around sovereignty and international intervention, finds **Julia Himmrich**.*

Changing Norms Though Actions: The Evolution of Sovereignty. Jennifer M. Ramos. Oxford University Press. March 2013.

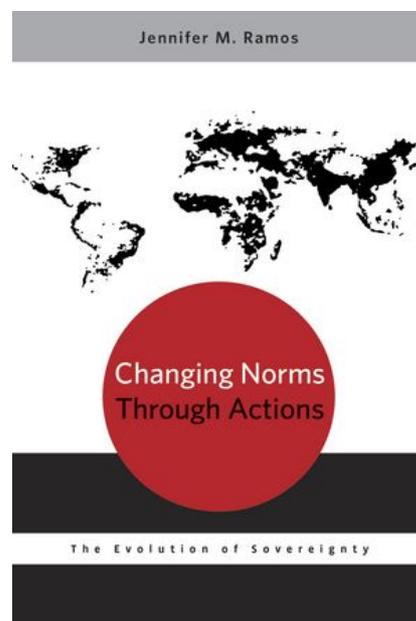
Find this book:

In her book *Changing Norms Through Actions: The Evolution of Sovereignty* [Jennifer M. Ramos](#) engages with the heart of the debate around the UN Security Council and its responsibility to maintain or restore international peace and security. It examines how *contingent sovereignty* challenges Westphalian sovereignty for international intervention, and how China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States - the permanent five Security Council members or P5 - have engaged with it.

Contingent sovereignty started to gain centre stage in the early/mid 2000s after the emergence of the 'Responsibility to Protect' doctrine (R2P) and has since then remained topical, most recently with the latest developments in the Middle East. Ramos succeeds in providing a systematic and original study by distancing herself from the classical rational choice arguments which have dominated the debate around humanitarian intervention and sovereignty. Instead she applies cognitive dissonance theory from behavioural psychology, through which she analyses how the P5 have responded to the conflicting norms when promoting or opposing intervention and thus breaching the traditional notion of absolute sovereignty.

In the second chapter, Ramos outlines in detail how the discourse of actions and ideas has defined international relations, drawing on wider literature from psychology and philosophy. It is a thorough outline of how the book will approach the interdependency of ideas and actions. The main ambition is to uncover how states reassess their norms, following their actions and the changing context of a situation, which follows William James' pragmatism.

Within the context of this book, the norms among which dissonance is created through actions of states are sovereignty of non-intervention vs. enforcing international peace and security. With these norms being particularly formalised within UN statutes and structure and the discord particularly evident within the UN Security Council, it becomes a great resource to trace the changes in the norms.



kindle edition

amazon

Ramos does so by analysing speeches of the P5 in three specific debates in the UNSC, regarding interventions for Counterterrorism (Afghanistan), for the Protection of Human Rights (Somalia) and for the protection from Weapons of Mass Destruction (Iraq). Through content analysis of the speeches of the relevant P5 interveners and non-interveners or protesters on each issue, she compares the references to State's Rights, State's Responsibilities, International Community's Rights and International Community's Obligations. For each state and each case she then compares how the reference of these terms changes through the progress of the intervention. This thorough and systematic approach results in three very insightful empirical chapters which build on the statistical evidence to provide in-depth insight into the politics in each P5 state.

The two chapters on interventions for the protection of human rights on the one hand and for the protection from WMDs on the other, highlight how norms may change following actions in some cases and fail to do so in others. Through the case of Somalia, Ramos argues that intervening states will push for contingent sovereignty when a long and expensive intervention continues, to continue to justify the action. In contrast, in the case of the intervention in Iraq in 2003, the intervening states – the UK and the US – changed their rhetoric as the intervention continued. The false premise of advocating contingent sovereignty for the protection from the diffusion of WMDs did no longer hold and was thus changed to arguments for a continued intervention for the purpose of democratisation. While the intervening states failed to align the norm with their action, 'the protesters' in the UNSC against intervention remained coherent in their position.

One area which could have been explored more thoroughly is how "non-interveners" justify their non-action. China, for example, emerges as a supporter for the respect of sovereignty in the case of Somalia, in which case human rights abuse was advocated by the intervening states as reason to promote contingent sovereignty. Ramos justifies this inaction from China with its *culpability*, which, she argues, keeps states from engaging with contingent sovereignty in specific cases. While China's human rights record may well have been the main reason for China not to engage in the intervention, it did not prevent an intervention by others. While Ramos' content analysis proves very insightful, this is one of a few examples throughout the book where the analysis of the foreign policy of the P5 would have enhanced the conclusions further. Similarly the discussion of France and Russia's protest towards the Iraq intervention is very much anecdotal and leaves the reader wanting a more cohesive framework in which the position could have been analysed.

The book's innovative approach to cognitive dissonance towards UNSC decisions does raise many interesting questions about the way P5 behaviour can be understood or even predicted. It is unfortunate that, possibly for the size of the task, the book was not able to continue to break conventions in its foreign policy analysis and move beyond some stylised characterisations of the politics of the P5.

A great strength of the book is that it sets out clearly the debate and background to the issues around sovereignty and international intervention. In-depth definitions and explanations make it an excellent introduction for students interested in international law and the developments on international intervention at UN level. Equally however the structure and style of the book follow a strict academic format and may make it difficult to appeal to a more policy-orientated audience. This would however be a shame, as the empirical evidence and interpretation of the data contribute greatly to the understanding of P5 behaviour on international interventions.

Julia Himmrich is PhD candidate at the LSE International Relations Department. [Read more reviews by Julia.](#)