



United Nations Peacekeeping: Trends and Challenges

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Background

As the world celebrates the 70th anniversary of the United Nations, leaders of more than fifty states met in September 2015 to debate the future of one of the UN's most debated activities— peacekeeping operations. A vital part of this event was devoted to discussing how to strengthen the existing capacities of UN peacekeeping missions, since deploying these international forces 'for common good' has become one of the most important and most expensive tasks of the organization in its endeavor to protect international peace and security. Even though the concept of peacekeeping is never mentioned in the UN Charter, it is in practice understood as a 'Chapter VI ½' measure, i.e. between the non-violent mediation of disputes, dealt with by the Chapter VI, and enforcement measures of Chapter VII of the UN Charter. This somewhat ambiguous status epitomizes well the underlying ambiguities and tensions of peacekeeping ever since its inception.

The peacekeeping forces were deployed for the first time in 1956 as a response to the Suez crisis to supervise the cessation of hostilities in the Middle East. Since then, the "blue helmets" have been tasked to manage conflict and limit violence in different parts of the world, but the ambitions, mandates as well as concrete practices of peacekeeping operations have differed greatly. From traditional

non-intrusive peacekeeping, characterized by upholding the principles of impartiality, host-state consent, and the minimal use of force, the practice of the UN peacekeeping operations has shifted in the post-Cold War era to incorporate also some aspects of what might be called peace-building and state-building agenda – the moment illustrated by publication of the highly influential *Agenda for Peace* in 1992. Temporarily held back by the failures of UN missions in Somalia, Rwanda and Bosnia, from the second half of 1990s on a steady rise in the number on UN peacekeeping operations entrusted with broad range of new tasks and powers including use of force may be observed. At the same time, the type of insecurities that peacekeeping forces are meant to deal with have changed immensely from the interstate conflicts of the Cold War era to contemporary intrastate conflicts, affecting thus the way the missions work and the competences they are given. A prime example is the involvement of UNIMIL peacekeepers in the fight against Ebola as a part of their task to provide humanitarian assistance and protect civilians.

Analysis

What are the main challenges that UN peacekeeping currently faces? Since all operations require the approval of all the permanent members of the UN Security Council, the most obvious challenge for the UN peacekeeping

politics is, like in the past, the international political environment. Nowadays, the polarized relations between the Western states and Russia, or BRICS, pose serious limits on what the UN can accomplish in this area and in which conflicts it intervenes. The current deadlock on acting in Syria is a clear example of the political barriers in the UN politics. On the contrary, though, a relatively swift authorization of a UN peacekeeping mission in the Central African Republic demonstrates that some conflicts are less politicized and the Security Council is able to reach consensus.

Expansion of the peacekeeping operations' tasks in the post-Cold war era, their more ambitious mandates and novel modes of engagements with the local actors have brought also many new challenges. Although some peacekeeping forces were deployed in highly volatile environments even during the Cold War, the UN engagement in internal conflicts, concern for the protection of civilians after the experiences in Bosnia and Rwanda and the presence of non-state armed actors have made many recent peacekeeping missions essentially fighting forces. This trend has not been unopposed as some of the most important and traditional force contributors, such as India, have expressed their reservation on compromising the peacekeeping imperatives of impartiality and strict limitations on the use of force. Other critics have pointed out that more robust mandates, if put into practice, might expose the peacekeepers to more risks, lead to the increased number of casualties and further complicate staffing of the missions. However, the relative casualty rate of UN personnel has significantly decreased since 1990s and the small recent rise of absolute numbers of fatalities is thus to be explained by the enlargement of the missions and especially by the high number of casualties in MINUSMA operation in Mali, as one recent study, *Peacekeepers Under Threat? Fatality Trends in UN Peace Operations*, shows. Indeed, in absolute terms, missions with the highest number of fatalities since 1990 are UNPROFOR in former Yugoslavia (207), UNAMID in Darfur (191) and UNAMSIL in Sierra Leone (172). MINUSMA in Mali (60) is thus not among the deadliest in a historical perspective, yet what makes it unusual is the very high proportion of hostile deaths among the fatalities: exactly two thirds (according to SIPRI, most fatalities

among UN peacekeepers overall result from non-hostile causes such as illness and accidents).

Despite these concerns, the trend of deploying robust force that is capable of confronting the hostile armed actors, protect civilians and 'extend the authority of the state' has been underway already for some time. It arguably started with the UNAMSIL in Liberia in 1999 and it has been recently only confirmed with the authorization of MINUSMA and MINUSCA in Central African Republic. The track record of the robust peacekeeping missions is however rather mixed. Even though they have succeeded in their initial goal of securing territory and bringing it under the control of the state and UN, in most of the cases (e.g. in DRC, Haiti, Darfur and recently also in Mali following the French invasion), the missions have subsequently struggled to preserve the initial successes and complement them with long-term stabilization.

According to the recent analysis *The Use of Force in UN Peacekeeping Operations: Problems and Prospects* by Mats Berdal and David Ucko, two broad sets of constraints have hindered most of the robust UN peacekeeping missions in their efforts: 1) insufficient capabilities and resources, and 2) the lack of political and strategic direction. The former has been a long-term challenge for the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO), which has often not been able to generate enough force even for smaller and less demanding traditional peacekeeping operations. However, the issue has been only exacerbated by the increased requirements of the robust missions and the need of highly specialized personnel, including the experienced fighting force. The lack of direction presents even more serious problem and it relates to the crucial questions regarding the purpose of the use of force and its integration into wider context of peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction of the state and/or other governance institutions.

In this context, many scholars have pointed out the 'internationals' lack of local knowledge that hampers the peacebuilding efforts. Members of peacekeeping missions often do not possess enough relevant information on the local or even national situation in the country where they are deployed, do not speak the native language, privilege the

international sources of knowledge over the local ones and misguidedly try to apply the blueprints of the 'liberal peace' on highly complex situations. The introduction of the community policing approach in Congo by the MONUSCO mission, as described by S. Autessere in her study *Peaceland*, might serve as a telling example of this problem. The program, originally developed in Northern American cities, was meant to improve the relations between the local police and people by increasing the visibility and presence of the police officers in the towns and villages. However, application of this approach in a context where police was highly mistrusted for decades, lacked adequate internal culture and its members survived largely on extortion and corruption, led to multiplication of perceived threats and higher sense of insecurity on the side of ordinary people rather than to intended effects. Thus, even though robust peacekeeping missions might be able to militarily defeat (some of) its armed opponents, the road to stability and sustainable peace is often complicated not only by the potential 'spoilers', but by the very practices through which the UN seeks to 'build' peace on the ground.

Bottom Line

Current peacekeeping operations by the UN are on one hand much more ambitious than they used to be. Yet on the other hand, they are constrained by the UN's political, legal and institutional setting. With the increasing deployment of peacekeepers in interstate conflicts, many expect that peacekeeping forces may stabilize complex social and political crises. Even though the UN forces take over new roles and competences, these expectations are not met with much success.

- UN peacekeeping operations do have a role in helping to mitigate and stabilize armed conflicts, but they operate in a specific environment that puts serious limits on what can be accomplished, in what time and with what resources. As such, even robust peacekeeping should not be seen as a universal solution to political and military crises. The international community should better learn from past achievements and failures of peacekeeping missions when formulating the aims and strategies for the new ones.
- Regional organizations and powers are important partners of the UN, as they may provide essential personal, logistic and material support to peacekeeping operations and help legitimize the missions towards the audience in its area of deployment. For developing a political strategy for a concrete mission and improving its functioning, though, local knowledge is crucial. This may require a more context-sensitive approach instead of blindly applying general principles and practices.
- The engagement with local population, however, should not be seen only as a strategic tool for obtaining more support for the mission, but rather as an opportunity to learn about the needs of those whose security is to be primarily protected. The UN should thus seek for building partnerships based on the principles of equality and transparency and be ready to familiarize itself with the established and functioning practices of the local communities. For instance, the investments into development (e.g. infrastructure) shall be driven not by what is most convenient for the donors or local elites, but what the local people really need.