



Five Paradoxes of Peace Operations

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In February 2011, United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon told an audience at Oxford University that, with 120,000 uniformed and civilian peacekeepers worldwide, “we are now considering what the optimal size of UN peacekeeping should be.” But peace operations are rarely shaped by objective considerations. UN and non-UN missions are plagued by contradictory pressures. From Haiti to Sudan, there are compelling arguments for maintaining large peacekeeping forces for the long term. But there are equally powerful financial and political reasons to cut them back.

There is no shortage of policy papers offering technical recommendations about how to reform peacekeeping. This paper takes a different approach, setting out five paradoxes that currently trouble officials dealing with peacekeeping at the UN, in governments and in organizations such as NATO, the European Union (EU) and the African Union (AU). The evolution of peacekeeping will depend on how policy-makers respond to these dilemmas.

Paradox 1 Military peacekeeping has grown in scale ... yet lost operational impact.

Of the 120,000 UN peacekeepers now in service, just over 80,000 are troops – the rest are military observers, police and civilian staff. This reflects an ongoing reliance on military forces to deter violence and, in extreme cases, use force to maintain stability.

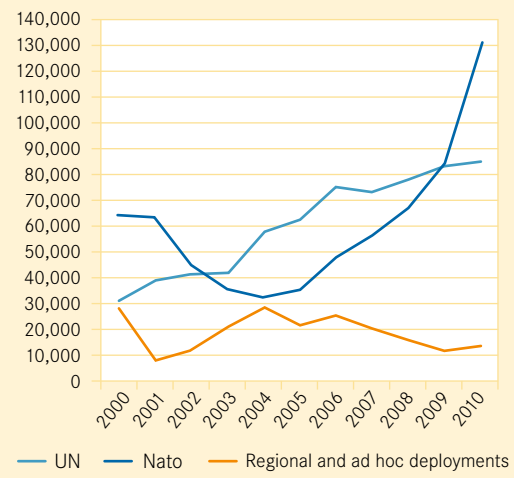
As of late 2010, the UN’s two largest missions, in Darfur and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), involved over 17,000 troops each. Five other operations (in Côte d’Ivoire, Haiti, Lebanon, Liberia and Sudan) involved between 7,000 and 12,000 troops each.

The UN’s total deployments are dwarfed by NATO’s presence in Afghanistan, which numbered over 130,000 troops in late 2010. But this mission is set to shrink in the years ahead. Other significant non-UN military peace operations include the NATO-led force in Kosovo (KFOR) and the AU’s growing presence in Somalia (AMISOM), both similar in scale to the UN’s mid-sized missions.

The existence of hefty military deployments does not necessarily mean that the troops involved are expected to use force frequently. The UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), for example, is not expected to undertake robust operations against Hezbollah.



Deployment of Military Peacekeepers 2000 – 2010



Source: Center on International Cooperation

Nonetheless, there have been a number of recent examples of peacekeepers using significant force. These include the UN's use of attack helicopters against Laurent Gbagbo's supporters in Côte d'Ivoire in April 2011 and AMISOM's engagement in running battles against Islamist militants in Mogadishu. Few operations have shifted into war-fighting as decisively as that in Afghanistan, but robust operations are common.

This does not necessarily mean that the military option is growing more effective. Many UN forces – not least those in the DRC and Darfur – lack the equipment, training and skills necessary to operate efficiently in challenging terrain or tackle well-armed spoilers. Force contributors place major caveats on the use of their contingents. Assets such as helicopters and field hospitals are in short supply.

There are operational limitations to UN and non-UN “police-keeping”, sometimes treated as an alternative to military operations. In January 2005, the UN deployed 6,800 police worldwide. Today it has over 14,000, or one for every six soldiers. The EU and AU have also invested in post-conflict policing. Nonetheless, the quality of international police officers is mixed. One recent internal review found that two-thirds of the UN's Formed Police Units (riot squads) did not meet basic operational requirements.¹ Although it is now accepted that police officers are a necessary part of most large-scale peace operations, they cannot replace military personnel altogether.

¹ See also Annika S. Hansen's ZIF Policy Briefing “Policing the Peace: The Rise of United Nations Formed Police Units” (May 2011).

Looking ahead, there are serious questions about (i) governments' willingness to supply the forces required to sustain large-scale operations; (ii) their readiness to permit peacekeepers to use decisive force in certain circumstances; and (iii) the potential blurring of peacekeeping, peace enforcement and war-fighting.

Paradox 2 Peacekeeping is cheap ... but it is also still too expensive.

For some governments, the current scale of peacekeeping is a budgetary as well as operational problem. This is in spite of the fact that UN operations, like those of the AU, are very cheap compared to Western interventions. Putting one UN peacekeeper in the field costs about 20% as much as deploying a NATO soldier. Moreover, the financial benefits of stabilizing fragile states are clear. The 2011 *World Development Report* argues that “the average cost of civil war is equivalent to more than 30 years of GDP growth for a medium-size developing country,” and argues peacekeeping can mitigate this damage.

UN operations are thus not only comparatively cheap, but may also help weak states generate wealth and thus reduce their reliance on outside aid. However, the major funders of UN operations – the US, EU members and Japan – have to balance their expenditure on peacekeeping against domestic demands for austerity. The UN peacekeeping budget hovers around US\$7–8 billion a year, and Western countries make significant financial contributions to AU operations as well as NATO and EU missions.

It remains to be seen (i) whether Western governments will reduce their funding for peacekeeping; and (ii) if emerging economies could fill some or all of the resulting funding gap.

Paradox 3 All peace operations are political ... but not all are guided by credible political strategies and few peacekeepers are good at politics.

Reflecting the operational and financial problems of large peace operations, there is an emphasis among peacekeeping experts and officials on the need for “political solutions.” Some argue that, in

cases such as Darfur and Chad, major operations have been launched where there is neither a firm political settlement nor a credible pathway to finding one.

Within the UN, there has been a growing interest in non-military political missions – such as the UN Assistance Mission in Iraq – as a flexible alternative to peacekeeping. Even where large peace operations are deployed, as in Sudan, there has been a greater emphasis on mediation and preventive diplomacy instead of military means.

The AU, having emphasized peacekeeping in both Darfur and Somalia, has also switched its attention to mediation in cases including Côte d'Ivoire and Libya. NATO has shifted from attempting to deal with the Taliban militarily to looking for talks.

Is it all about the UN?

This paper concentrates first and foremost on UN peacekeeping, while drawing parallels with other organizations. This is not meant to minimize the importance of non-UN operations. But with NATO starting to draw down in Afghanistan, the AU focused on Somalia and the EU launching far fewer new missions than in the mid-2000s, the UN has center stage.

Nonetheless, this could change rapidly. Little more than ten years ago, UN operations had been written off after Bosnia. Five or six years ago, it was still possible to argue that regional organizations such as the EU and AU would gradually eclipse the UN. The UN's resilience as a peacekeeping provider is impressive – but it is far from guaranteed.

There is a gap between the general faith in political solutions and the ability of UN officials – and representatives of other organizations – to devise and nurture these solutions. Many peacekeepers suffer from a lack of expertise about the country they are deployed in or are simply overwhelmed by the organizational burdens of running large-scale missions. Where opportunities for mediation arise, multiple envoys from different organizations appear and often clash.

Looking forward, it must be asked whether (i) the current emphasis on political solutions will contribute to a shift away from heavy peacekeep-

ing towards lighter civilian missions; and (ii) if the UN and others have enough expertise to run the latter properly.

Paradox 4 Peacekeepers promote democracy and justice ... but democracy and justice don't always promote peace.

There are also fundamental tensions over what values should be applied to finding political solutions to conflict. Over the last decade, the UN has been accused of pursuing a Western agenda in post-conflict countries, with a strong emphasis on democracy, human rights and international justice rather than adapting to local power dynamics. The Ivorian crisis, in which a sound election was followed by violence, highlighted the dangers involved.

In some cases, UN officials have had to compromise on issues of democracy and justice to sustain peace processes. The most obvious example is Sudan, where the UN has had to cooperate with President Bashir even though the International Criminal Court (ICC) has indicted him for genocide in Darfur. In the DRC, the UN has been accused of operating too closely with the national army, which has a dire record on human rights.

Similar tensions affect other organizations. The AU's members have opposed the ICC's pursuit of President Bashir and, more recently, Colonel Gaddafi. In Kosovo, the EU's mission has had to balance supporting the government with arresting senior officials on corruption charges.

Some peacekeeping veterans argue that it's time to move away from Western models of peacebuilding and take a more pragmatic approach to peace deals. But ignoring human rights and justice may both be damaging in the longer-term and offend public opinion.

It remains to be seen (i) whether peacekeeping moves away from a liberal agenda to greater realpolitik; (ii) if the Security Council will continue to use the ICC as a tool for managing peacekeeping-related crises; and (iii) if this might slowly undermine the ICC.

Paradox 5 Emerging non-Western powers play a major role in peacekeeping ... but may not want it.

The question of whether peacekeeping has been harnessed to too Western an agenda is often tied to a debate about the role of rising non-Western powers in shaping future operations. All the BRICS countries bar Russia play large roles in UN operations. India is consistently among the top five troop contributors to UN operations. Brazil has played a lead role in Haiti. China has increased its presence in UN operations from almost nothing a decade ago to roughly 2,000 troops today and has concentrated on supplying good-quality engineer and medical units. South Africa is among the most influential African troop contributors.

The commitment of these powers to the UN (combined with that of other emerging economies such as Indonesia) has looked advantageous for the organization in recent years. While NATO countries have been exhausted by the Afghanistan campaign, non-Western governments are investing in military modernization, suggesting that they should be able to offer the UN a growing range of assets.

It is not certain that they will want to. There have been strains in both Brazil's and India's relations with the UN. Brazilian officials are increasingly unhappy with the length and expense of their presence in Haiti. Some Indian policy-makers fear that UN commitments are a distraction from more immediate security concerns and New Delhi has withdrawn much-needed helicopters from the DRC and Sudan.

China presents its expanding role in UN operations as proof of its international responsibility, but this has been offset by its cautious approach to these deployments. It has increased its contributions very gradually and not yet deployed standard infantry units that might be called upon to take part in risky robust operations.

Equally strikingly, these emerging powers have not yet presented new or radical conceptions of how peacekeeping should evolve in the future.

They have demanded greater influence over existing operations. India, for example, is rumored to have threatened to withdraw from UN missions altogether unless it received more command posts. But such diplomatic scuffles have not yet escalated into a broader strategic battle of ideas.

How long will the *status quo* persist? It is necessary to ask (i) whether emerging powers will strengthen or weaken their contributions to peacekeeping; (ii) whether they will eventually lay out alternative agendas for operations; and (iii) whether it will be possible for Western and non-Western powers to find consensus on what operations should do and how to share responsibility for funding, managing and staffing them.

Conclusion

How will peacekeeping evolve in the context of these five paradoxes? It is possible to argue that current pressures mean that (i) heavy military peace operations will be drawn down for cost reasons; (ii) there will be a shift away from ambitious liberal peace-building efforts; and (iii) the emerging powers will support this post-Western agenda.

Yet it is also possible to project that (i) both Western governments and the emerging powers will conclude that they have mutual interests in sustaining large, well-armed peace operations; and (ii) they will continue to promote the norms of democracy and international justice.

Yet peacekeeping could evolve in entirely different ways altogether. The actual outcome will be defined not by any one government or single international organization but through their interactions and compromises. Having grown so large, the global peacekeeping system is ever more uncertain. Yet policy-makers must still try to resolve the five paradoxes set out in this paper, as the alternative will be growing confusion over the political, financial and operational dimensions of peace operations.

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